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# Idealized Bodies, the Grotesque and Homosocial Communities: Masculinities and Men's Magazines.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy in Sociology.

The University of Warwick,  
Department of Sociology.

December 2005.



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# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Prof. Terry Lovell and Dr. Deborah Lynn Steinberg for their crucial advice and support throughout my research, and for helping me to maintain focus throughout my work. I was extremely lucky to have two great supervisors.

I would also like to thank my very good friends Carolync, Jason, Hywel, Gwenfair, Nick, Caroline, Darren, Emily and Vicky for their friendship and entertainment throughout my time as a Ph.D. student.

A special mention must go to the Department of Sociology and the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender at the University of Warwick for being a warm, friendly, and supportive environment to study.

Finally I would like to especially thank my partner Kevin for all of his support and dedication.

# Declaration

This thesis is being submitted to the University of Warwick in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at any other university.

# Abstract

This thesis examines images and dialogues of the male body in contemporary men's lifestyle magazines. Taking the examples of two top-selling British men's lifestyle magazines *FHM* and *Men's Health*, and their respective websites, I unpack mediated constructions of white, heterosexual masculinities using the combined methods of semiology, discourse analysis and non-participant observation. The male body is central to this project, and the ways that it is represented as idealized and grotesque are analysed for the ways that they each impact upon perceptions of white heterosexual masculinities and conceptions of the 'Other'. Reading the male body as idealised and grotesque also introduces wider feminist debates on the male gaze, representation, and whether the grotesque can be theorised from the perspective of masculinities. The construction of online communities and reader dialogues is also examined in relation to discourses of the body, identity and masculinity. The work in this thesis explores the basis for contemporary representations of white heterosexual masculinities and male bodies in men's lifestyle magazines and their respective websites.



# Introduction

In this thesis the analysis of men's lifestyle magazines is an interdisciplinary project that employs semiology, discourse analysis and non-participant observation to deconstruct the images, narratives and constructed communities of two top-selling British men's magazines, *FHM* and *Men's Health*, and their respective websites. The research involved in this project is text based, and aims to retheorise the relationship between men's lifestyle magazines and contemporary, white, western masculinities using a comparative examination of two distinct poles of men's magazine cultures. The time frame for my analysis of *FHM*, *FHM.com*, *Men's Health* and *menshealth.co.uk* spanned October 2001 - May 2005. The extension of my time frame was a result of the introduction of 'MMS Gallery' to *FHM.com*, a section of the website which extends the interactive relationships between users of the site by encouraging readers to send and display text messages and photographs. The movement of men's lifestyle magazines onto the internet in recent years has both shifted and extended the ways in which magazines represent themselves, and has allowed the evolution of homosocial male communities as interaction has increasingly been developed between the readers and producers of magazines. The repositioning of men's lifestyle magazines onto the internet has not yet been fully examined or theorised, and ideas regarding homosociality can be complemented and re-examined by study of the idiomatic, generic conventions that constitute male readers as a 'community' online.

Alongside the movement of men's magazines online and the creation of homosocial communities, my project will analyse the relationship between men's lifestyle magazines and contemporary, white, western masculinities through extensive reference to the grotesque. Despite both being men's lifestyle magazines, *FHM* and *Men's Health* contrast significantly in terms of outlook, perspective, and with respect to how hegemonic masculinities are defined. The differences between these two magazines occur in the split between humour and fitness culture, as where *FHM* mocks sobriety and seriousness, *Men's Health* is sincere and emphatic in its promotion of fitness and the shaping of idealised bodies. The contrasting use of grotesque and idealised bodies can be read as one aspect marking this attenuation of men's lifestyle magazines into distinct types. From my reading of *FHM* and *Men's Health*, I also came to understand the ways in which the male body, the positioning of 'Others' and the grotesque are crucial in defining the heterosexual self, both on behalf of the magazine producers and also for consumers who interact with printed magazines via problem pages and online through interactive message boards. *FHM* and *Men's Health* provide a basis from which to analyse the ways that both idealised bodies and grotesque bodies are represented for a predominantly heterosexual, male audience, and in doing so this project will engage with the grotesque to extend aesthetic readings of masculinity that have previously overlooked this area of representation.



## Intellectual Aims of this Project

My thesis is positioned within debates surrounding men's lifestyle magazines and representations of the (white) male body, the grotesque and masculine communities.

As a consequence of reading *FHM*, *FHM.com*, *Men's Health* and *menshealth.co.uk* over the research period, the following intellectual aims emerged for this thesis.

- Drawing on Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque and on conceptions of the abject, I intend to reinvestigate the complexities of embodied masculinities in men's lifestyle magazine cultures. In particular, I will consider the ways in which grotesque bodies indicate key tensions in contemporary masculine identities and body reflexive practices. I will examine ways in which grotesque figures are linked to the construction of (white) heterosexual masculinities, and consider evidence of a specifically male grotesque in the culture of men's magazines.
- As part of the above reinvestigation of embodied masculinities, I will also deconstruct ways in which idealized male bodies are represented to readers of *FHM* and *Men's Health*. This will involve consideration of how male bodies are positioned in relation to theories of the gaze, how male bodies are targeted towards heterosexual male readers, and a reconsideration of the ways in which female and gay bodies emblematised and constitute heterosexual, masculine values.
- Drawing on Bakhtin's work on speech genres, I will consider the interactive context of male users both reading and contributing to the online magazine, and investigate the ways in which the shift to internet interactivity has

reconstituted masculine readership in terms of speech communities. I will examine the extent to which online magazine websites are spaces for the construction of community, and how homosocial communities are articulated by readers/writers.

This research project is located in debates on masculinities, representation and the internet as a site for collective readership. Now that I have outlined the intellectual aims of this project, I will turn to a brief discussion of white masculinities, heterosexual masculinities and critical men's studies as conceptual tools, in order both to position the white, heterosexual, male subject of my research more clearly, and to highlight how whiteness and heterosexuality are conceived at the onset of my work. I will discuss some of the tensions in debates that will become apparent later in this thesis, and will also locate my work in the context of debates on hegemonic masculinities.

## White Masculinities

In this thesis I analyse the construction of heterosexual masculinities in men's lifestyle magazines, taking the examples of *FHM* and *Men's Health*. The heterosexual subject in this context is primarily white, as while neither *FHM* or *Men's Health* promote racism, and while both do portray black bodies in a variety of contexts, the vast majority of models featured in these two magazines are white; the body is unmarked as white. Furthermore, features on style and grooming products can be seen to implicitly cater for white masculinities, as one participant on a message board thread on *menshealth.co.uk* called 'Black Websites' stated:



Black skin looks different! Some clothes/colours/ styles look well cool on black guys and rubbish on pale white spotty guys (for example black shirts!) so there are far more issues than you might think.. different hair care/ styles/ complications.. Jewellery looks different on black skin.. sickle cell issues.. and why black men look better in the gym!

also there wil be issues which are based on white racism to be taken into account.. eg wearing hoods ( don't do it! people think you are on the rob! )

Just millions of reasons. i think its naive to think that mags like men's health (overwhelmingly white models for example) cater as precisely to a black audience as you might at first think, even though the facts are similar, the fact that the mag is aspirational yet looking at the models they are mostly white would prove tiresome to me, and probably seem a bit weird (I am white) I know that when I look at a black mag it seems weird that there are no white faces(not that I think black faces are weird!) so I guess the feeling is reversed to some extent.

For women the issues are far wider.. especially skin care, sun protection, make up, hairstyles, as there is a hell of a lot of variation in face shape skin tone, and sun protection needed for black skin as well as white, but white mags are going to be so so so off the mark for black readers, and nothing like as comprehensive.

and when you get into cultural things.. well diets are different, expectations are different and there are topics like the fact that white people can talk about 'running in the countryside' but that people with black and asian skins are overwhelmingly (almost exclusively) 'urban' and so black mags can talk more confidently about 'urban' style and issues in the awareness that this will be a tighter coverage of the market than for 'general' mags, which has obvious implications for advertisers, and the type of information they can pull out.

[...]

(*menshealth.co.uk*, 'Black Websites', posted 28.11.02).<sup>1</sup>

The writer quoted above identifies himself as white and adopts a male username. It is interesting to see how this white, male-identified participant articulates a wide variety of racial issues, and his opinion demonstrates how readers of *menshealth.co.uk* express conflict as well as consent with the wider cultural environment (I will discuss diversity of opinion through the notion of heteroglossia in Chapter 8). However, there are many

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that any inconsistencies in spelling, punctuation or grammar are the writers own.

readers of *menshealth.co.uk* who perceive issues of race and ethnicity to be irrelevant to the subject of men's lifestyle and fitness magazines, preferring universalistic concepts of 'manhood' in the production of the fit male body and homosocial communities (this will also be discussed in Chapter 8). Issues of race and ethnicity are taboo subjects in magazine cultures in comparison with, for example, sexism and the display of women's bodies as sex objects, and where race and/or racism are raised the subjects often cause controversy. The work in this thesis is focused on gender and masculinity, but draws attention to the ways in which covert and unmarked signifiers of 'race' underpin the construction and representation of hegemonic masculinity.

My analysis of *menshealth.co.uk* revealed that there are (self identified) black, Asian and mixed race male personae participating on the *Men's Health* message boards, although this area of analysis was difficult since race was rarely marked in speech in comparison with gender or sexuality. Issues of race are often sidelined in the preference for wider discussions on the message board headings concerning the male body, fitness, health, sexuality and relationships. Such topics are implicitly deemed universal for all British men, and in his seminal work *White*, Richard Dyer suggested that the notion of universality is an undercurrent in the concept of white racial identities in western cultures, where there is an assumption that to be white is to somehow lack race (Dyer:1997:1). As Ann Phoenix states,

The absence of focus on 'whiteness' coupled with implicit constructions of white people as 'the norm' serves to maintain the privileged position of whiteness, but to obscure the ways in which it is implicated in power relations (Phoenix:1997:187).



Phoenix notes the general failure of dominant groups to reflect upon their position of power, and in her analysis of white Londoners she demonstrated the difficulty and reluctance expressed in reflecting upon white identities (Phoenix:1997). White heterosexual masculinities are the most socially, economically and politically privileged groups in western societies. Yet there is not only diversity within such identities in terms of status and power, but also reciprocal anxieties. This thesis will examine the vulnerability as well as the power associated with white heterosexual masculinity, and will engage with the ways in which white heterosexual men perceive both the self and socially positioned 'Others'.

## **Heterosexual Masculinities**

The central subjects in this thesis are heterosexual, male readers of *FHM* and *Men's Health*. This research project is not designed to engage with wider debates in gay and lesbian studies, but will use selected material relevant to the positioning of heterosexual male audiences in men's lifestyle magazines. I will investigate ways that the 'white' male body is framed and targeted towards heterosexual readers, and will examine the ambiguous cultural codes that generate complexity in theories both of the gaze, and of reading relations. Homosocial desire complicates Laura Mulvey's work on the male gaze, as does the work of writers such as Sean Nixon, Jon Stratton, Tim Edwards and Susan Bordo who have all discussed the growing trend of appropriating homoerotic and gay cultural images to sell consumer products to heterosexual audiences (Nixon:1996, Stratton:1996, Edwards:1997, Bordo:1999). In her discussion of the

ambiguous representation of male models in Calvin Klein advertising, Bordo stated that,

Images of masculinity that will do double (or triple or quadruple) duty with a variety of consumers, straight and gay, male and female, are not difficult to create in a culture like ours, in which the muscular male body has a long and glorious aesthetic history (Bordo:1999:181-2).

Following on from Bordo, I deconstruct the ways in which advertisers and magazine producers frame men's bodies as bodies of desire and/or consumption, and I examine how heterosexual men recognise, articulate and negotiate the ambiguous positioning of the male body in advertising and men's magazines. I will analyse the tensions that exist between images of the desirable male body and heterosexual masculinities, and will question whether men are positioned as subjects or objects of the male gaze.

In this thesis I investigate ways in which heterosexual male personae articulate homosocial desires, and examine some of the tensions verbalised towards homocrotic male bodies. Gay readers are given a voice in *menshealth.co.uk*, and I question how the cultural framework supports the tensions between gay and straight identified personae through the concept of heteroglossia, and the ways in which heterosexual men collectively articulate notions of heterosexuality. In *FHM*, gay sexuality is rendered invisible unless it is expressed in terms of humour and/or insult for the entertainment of heterosexual readers. I will therefore consider how gay cultural codes are problematically positioned in the fashion and advertising space of *FHM*, and also



how gay men are implicated in conceptions of heterosexual masculinity as a point of contrast, firmly set as the 'Other' to the established cultural norm.

## **Feminism, Critical Men's Studies and Hegemonic Masculinity**

I will now discuss the influence of feminism and critical men's studies upon my work, paying particular attention to the concept of hegemonic masculinities. Despite being the most obvious influence upon my work, feminism is the most difficult to define and position myself within, given the changes in my own feminist perspectives over time. Whereas I initially started my academic studies in the firm belief that I was a socialist feminist, throughout my time as a postgraduate student I have increasingly been influenced by poststructuralism. For example, I was, like many socialist feminists influenced by the work of Michel Foucault on power and discourse (Barrett:1991). In this thesis, I have drawn on Foucault to show how concepts of identity are relative and shifting, and his influence is present in my readings of white heterosexual masculinities in ways that negotiate the terms of power.

The altercation within feminism as it split between the missionary zeal of poststructuralism and then postmodernism, with the wish of the latter to place clear blue sky between the new '1990s' and the old '1970s' feminisms and the defenders of Marxist and socialist feminists, was founded on a common syllogism: 'If a

Marxist/socialist feminist, then not a poststructuralist, and if a poststructuralist, then not a Marxist/socialist feminist'. Yet Bakhtin, whose framework I have drawn upon extensively in this thesis, demonstrates that such simple oppositions may be resisted. Bakhtin cannot be positioned exclusively as a poststructuralist, although his work can be seen to incite certain aspects of this philosophical tradition. For Bakhtin stated himself in *Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences*, 'my attitude towards structuralism: I am against enclosure in text' (Bakhtin:1986:169). Yet, as I suggest in Chapter 4, Bakhtin also maintained the importance of structural factors that set limits on speech and dialogue, as is evident in his work on heteroglossia, monoglossia and carnival.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis placed upon difference, subjectivity and plurality in poststructuralist discourse has allowed researchers to analyse power relations as discursive formations.

Alan Petersen succinctly presents the more 'poststructuralist' Bakhtin:

Eschewing structuralists' search for the underlying rules, codes and systems that govern social phenomena, and the urge to develop grand synthesizing theories, poststructuralists have focused on the inextricable links between power and knowledge and on how individuals are constituted as subjects and given unified identities. Poststructuralists have drawn attention to micropolitics and emphasize subjectivity, difference and everyday life (Petersen:2003:55).

But just as Bakhtin straddles the structuralist/poststructuralist opposition, so too does another important source for my work in this thesis, the concept of hegemonic masculinities. This thesis is not intended to provide a theoretical debate on hegemonic

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<sup>2</sup> Heteroglossia and monoglossia will be discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 8. Carnival, and Bakhtin's work on the grotesque and the carnivalesque, will be analysed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 7.



masculinities, however since I use this term at a number of points in my work it is important to outline how I understand it. The concept of hegemonic masculinity relates to work by Antonio Gramsci, who formulated his theory of hegemony to account for ways that dominant classes maintain power partly through consent, or, the ‘cultural leadership exercised by the ruling class’ (Ritzer:1992:280). As Jeff Hearn states, ‘the notion of hegemony provides a way of talking about overarching ideologies at the level of everyday, taken-for-granted ideas and practice performed ‘with consent’, ‘without coercion’ (Hearn:2004:54). During the 1980s, writers such as Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell and John Lee expanded the concept of hegemony in order to analyse gendered power relations, linking hegemony to the idea of masculinities as plural identities, and created a theory to understand how gendered power relations work on numerous levels, both for and against groups of men. In an influential article called *Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity*, they stated that,

What emerges from this line of argument is the very important concept of *hegemonic masculinity*, not as ‘the male role,’ but as a particular variety of masculinity to which others – among them young and effeminate as well as homosexual men – are subordinated. It is particular groups of men, not men in general, who are oppressed within patriarchal sexual relations, and whose situations are related in different ways to the overall logic of the subordination of women to men. A consideration of homosexuality thus provides the beginnings of a dynamic conception of masculinity as a structure of social relations (Carrigan, Connell and Lee:1987:86. Original emphasis).

The idea that masculinity is plural and discursively produced through complex power relations is compatible with the notion of hegemonic masculinities. Writers such as Carrigan, Connell and Lee used hegemonic masculinity as a way to re-think concepts of patriarchy, to take into account the differences between men without losing sight of the

power that men exert. As Connell stated in his subsequent work on *Gender and Power*,

‘Hegemonic masculinity’ is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. The interplay between different forms of masculinity is an important part of how a patriarchal social order works (Connell:1987:183).

In this thesis I will engage with notions of hegemonic masculinities, particularly the interplay between hegemonic masculinities, subordinated masculinities (gay men and/or black men) and women.

In this thesis, hegemonic masculinities are contextually based, and I do not claim that the construction of powerful, idealized bodies in the context of men’s magazines directly mirrors the construction of hegemonic masculinity in wider social, economic and political relations. While it is my belief that hegemonic masculinities in men’s magazines hold wider social implications for gender relations, the way that hegemonic masculinities are constructed in, for example, *Men’s Health*, would not necessarily be read as hegemonic in a different social setting. The hegemonic ideal in *Men’s Health* bears relevance to its context as an embodiment of power through discourses of fitness and popular culture which would look both uncomfortable and relatively powerless in a different social/economic/political setting. Similarly, within the self-deprecating culture of *FHM*, the lad is placed as hegemonic in his omnipotence and control over ‘Others’.

In this thesis I will analyse recurring themes and patterns that contribute to constructions of masculinities, and I will explore how different types of masculinities are invested in hegemonic power relations.



There are a broad range of literatures that have been drawn upon throughout my work, and which represent an interdisciplinary project grounded in social, media and cultural studies. I will now introduce some of these literatures as I present the order of discussion of this thesis. In Chapter 1, I present a brief history of men's lifestyle magazines and their transition to online magazines, locating central influences on the production of *FHM* and *Men's Health* and viewing the evolution of men's magazines alongside shifts in conceptions of masculinity. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are three sets of literature reviews that situate this project within a wider set of debates that have provided its overarching context and conceptual frame. They each anticipate and largely correspond with the chapters of analysis that constitute the heart of my thesis in chapters 6, 7 and 8, and I will now outline each of these pairs of chapters.

Chapter 2 will present an overview of debates on representation, the concepts of the gaze and of objectification. It will engage closely with both Mulvey's and Foucault's notion of 'the (male/surveying) gaze' in order to take up the notion of the gaze in the context of men's printed and online magazines, and will address the limits of gaze theory in relation to theorisations of magazines. Chapter 6 is the first half of two comparative chapters, with Chapter 6 noting ways in which men's magazines are characterised by idealizing dimensions (whereas Chapter 7 argues that men's magazines are characterised by abject dimensions). In emerging to the foreground as the main counter-tendencies in the current incarnations of the printed magazines, grotesque and idealised bodies represent a shift in the arena of imagined identities constituted by

men's magazine cultures. In Chapter 6, I explore the divergence of men's magazines in the eroticizing regimes of men's bodies, using the front covers as a point of comparison to show that the shift in men's magazines has produced a shift in gazes. I argue that the Adonis/Herculean/athlete are typologies of white masculinities and privileged points of identification in men's magazines. The chapter investigates the scrutinising of (white) male bodies in men's lifestyle magazines, and the tensions concerning the gaze and identifications. I argue that a consuming (ambiguous) heterosexuality is both privileged and held in tension by both the divergent constitutions of narcissistic identification (idealized and grotesque), and the competing negotiations of heterosexism and homoeroticism.

Chapter 3 will review Bakhtin and Kristeva's respective theories of the grotesque and the abject that have informed my engagement with the complexities of masculine positioning articulated by men's magazines. Their theories underpin analysis in Chapter 7 of *FHM*'s explicit use of male and female grotesques, and of the abjected grotesque as a point of anxiety in *Men's Health*. In Chapter 7 I explore how the grotesque functions to ridicule through excess, cruelty and the prurient humour of *FHM*. In *Men's Health* the grotesque is latent, the off-stage monstrous masculine that must be repudiated and repressed through self-discipline and the pursuit of idealized bodies. Both sites display significant anxieties or ambivalences about representations of excess and extremity. These chapters challenge notions that the grotesque is intrinsically and exclusively a feminised position, and that men's magazines are sites



primarily distinguished by the eroticisation and idealisation of an ornamental male body.

Chapter 4 draws upon four sets of analytic resources: feminist critical practices on gender identity work and the internet; notions of community, online communities and personae as sites for social bonding; perspectives and experiences of Consciousness Raising as a site of both gender identity work and as social movement; and Bakhtin's theories regarding speech communities as applied to interactive 'readership' practices and notions of heteroglossia. I progress through these sets of literature, and in particular Bakhtin's work, in order to elaborate the ways in which gender identity work may be simultaneously constituted as gender community work. In Chapter 8, I view both *FHM.com* and *menshealth.co.uk* as sites for collective readership, and investigate the homosocial, communal desires and modes of (dis)connection in these sites among men. I examine the shift in representation within each online version of the magazine, in particular the centrality of message board conversations on *menshealth.co.uk* and its homosocial community developed through the interactive contexts of collective reading and writing. I analyse the shift in modes of representation on *FHM.com* through the ways in which it pulls the grotesque further to the foreground than in the printed magazine, and I interpret the effects of their online community functioning as a restricted space where men are prevented from engaging in the kind of communicative relations available in *menshealth.co.uk*. Viewing two radically divergent forms of interactive homosocial communities as sites for collective readership enables me to

question the role of this aspect of popular culture in the constitution of homosociality, in particular through the potentially anonymous message boards of *menshealth.co.uk* that facilitate affective terms of relationality and the breaking down of emotional barriers.

In this thesis I will develop original analysis regarding the relationship between British men's lifestyle magazines and contemporary, white, masculinities in a number of specific respects. For example, this project will complicate theories of the gaze through analysing representations of the male body as the focal point of the gaze in men's magazines, and the work on message boards will illustrate that male participants on *menshealth.co.uk* possess increased recognition of the ambiguous sexual positioning of the male body. My analysis of *Men's Health* will reveal that while it presents a vision of masculinity bound within concepts of whiteness, it employs visual imagery that has traditionally been viewed as the domain of black men, and in doing so challenges traditional mind/body binaries and reclaims the white physical body as an embodiment of power. This thesis finally develops original analysis in the arguments surrounding the variety of evidence of a specifically male grotesque in the culture of men's magazines. I will now move onto a history of men's magazines in order to position my own analytical work.



# Chapter 1

## A History of Men's Lifestyle Magazines

### Introduction: The Early Years

In this chapter I will trace the development of men's magazines in order to place *FHM* and *Men's Health* into their historical contexts. The origin of modern men's lifestyle magazines lies in the 1930s with magazines such as *Esquire* and *Vogue Hommes* being published in America and France. Magazines for men had existed prior to the 1930s, however such titles were designed for specific interests and hobbies rather than around the subjects of male desire and consumption. There had been earlier men's general interest magazines, for example *The Gentleman's Magazine*, which was published in England during the eighteenth century and 'is often considered the first modern magazine. It was published by Edward Cave in England in 1731 and continued publication until the First World War. It aimed to entertain, with essays, stories, poems and political comment' (*Magforum.com*, 'Men's Magazines I: Early Evolution', accessed 06.04.05). However, while *The Gentlemen's Magazine* offered discussion on a variety of subjects, the launch of *Esquire* and *Vogue Hommes* represented masculinities around the subjects of consumption, fashion and heterosexuality, introducing dimensions of 'lifestyle' that were organized around masculinity and leisure.

It is particularly through the example of *Esquire* magazine that we can see the first clear influence upon modern day magazines such as *FHM* and *Men's Health*, with consumerism being mixed with the representation of women as objects of sexual desire (albeit through raunchy illustrations rather than photography). Kenon Breazeale has claimed that *Esquire* was the first attempt by a magazine to organise a male consumer audience, using features on fashion, comedy and literature to bind men into a sense of masculine camaraderie, and that it offered representation of women as sexual objects suitable for the '...coffee table and not hidden upstairs in the sock drawer' (Breazeale:2000:233). While early publications of *Esquire* cannot be said to have portrayed women in the same way as modern day men's magazines such as *FHM* and *Men's Health* (who draw upon photographs of partially naked women's bodies), the representation of women as sexual objects constructed for the male gaze was evident in *Esquire* magazine. The influence of *Esquire* paved the way for the representation of women's bodies as both sexually desirable and acceptable in men's magazines, influencing later titles such as *Playboy* in the 1950s.

## **The 1950s and the Launch of *Playboy***

*Esquire* was a forerunner in the attempt both to commodify the male body and to use women's bodies as a focus for heterosexual desire within a respectable consumer product. Moving to the 1950s and the launch of *Playboy* magazine in December 1953, we see the development of a men's magazine that was dedicated to the bachelor lifestyle and to the photographic representation of women as sexually desirable objects.



*Playboy* introduced soft-core pornography into the men's lifestyle magazine, combining consumer tips with fiction, humour, celebrity interviews, fashion and photographs of women in fully naked poses. As an erotic, soft-core pornographic magazine for men, *Playboy* was very different to the illustrated depictions of women in the earlier *Esquire*. However, Gail Dines claims that *Playboy* extended what was deemed culturally acceptable and brought pornography out of the closet and onto the coffee table (Dines:1995:254). *Playboy* positioned itself as 'quality' pornography, and as Dines states, 'the thinking behind this packaging concept, according to John Mastro, the product manager of *Playboy*, was that 'quality takes some of the shock off nudity'' (Dines:1995:255). The influence of *Playboy* is particularly evident in the rise of lads' magazines such as *FHM*, *Loaded* and *Maxim* during the 1990s, and indeed such magazines have paid homage to *Playboy* with special issues such as *Maxim's* 'Playboys' issue in December 2002. Barbara Ehrenreich claimed that the launch of *Playboy* 'encouraged the sense of membership in a fraternity of male rebels' while at the same time advocating the notion of pleasurable consumption (Ehrenreich:1983:43-4). *Playboy* targeted readers as sophisticated consumers of women, sex and consumer goods, and as Rowena Chapman stated,

Hefner's *Playboy* represented a challenge to this ethic [of the 1950s breadwinner], with its propagation of the doctrine of escape from conformity and whole-hearted embrace of hedonism. For *Playboy* was about far more than just the sexual objectification of women (Chapman:1988:233).

Magazines such as *FHM*, *Loaded* and *Maxim* drew upon the discursive repertoires of *Playboy*, using women, sex, rebellion and hedonism to design a new consumer group that the mass media has described as the 'new lad'.

The idea of readers being ‘male rebels’ was re-marketed with the idea of the lad, where rebellion became re-defined to embrace prurient humour and the grotesque. The launch of *Playboy* was significant on many levels, as not only did it glamorise the bachelor lifestyle as one of style and consumption, but it also paved the way for subsequent soft-core pornographic magazines such as *Penthouse* (1969) and the more hard-core *Hustler* (1974). I do not intend to go into detail on the rise of pornographic magazines, yet the influence of soft-core pornography was evident in the launch of lads’ magazines in the mid to late 1990s and into the new millennium. Writers such as Tim Edwards have outlined how soft-core pornographic repertoires are drawn upon in men’s lifestyle magazines so that men can obtain strength from the marginalisation of women. As Edwards suggests, women’s bodies are typically presented as sexual objects and ‘set up in defensive opposition to the endlessly homoerotic displays of men’s fashion, style and accessories’ (Edwards:1997:78). Lads’ magazines have adopted a new brand of masculinity through the idea of the lad that depends upon women’s bodies as a site for bonding and visual pleasure. In this respect they function in comparable ways to pornography, where writers such as David Buchbinder have claimed that pornography offers men a basis for homosocial bonding through the marginalisation of women, as even when it is consumed alone, pornography provides an illusion of a community of men who are part of the action (Buchbinder:1998:104-110). Stars and celebrities are an essential aspect of the representational framework of lads’ magazines such as *FHM*, with female celebrities offering their bodies as objects of sexual desire and titillation. The tradition for star centrefolds can be seen in *Playboy* as far back as their first edition in December 1953 and the naked ‘sweetheart of the month’ Marilyn



Monroe. Since its launch, *Playboy* has maintained iconic status in the men's magazine market, with numerous stars and celebrities offering interviews and photo shoots, and consequently helping to bring this soft-core pornographic title into mainstream cultural consciousness.

## 1980s UK Style Magazines

So far I have considered the examples of *Esquire* and *Playboy* as being particularly influential in paving the way for the modern format of men's lifestyle magazines.

However, wider influences from the 1980s style and fashion press must also be taken into account in tracing a history of modern day magazines. Fashion is a central element of men's lifestyle magazines today, and both *FHM* and *Men's Health* depend on fashion advertising for revenue, and incorporate fashion features as integral aspects of editorial content. Writers such as Sean Nixon, Frank Mort, and Tim Edwards have signalled the influences that the 1980s fashion and style press had upon the rise of later men's lifestyle magazines in the 1990s, highlighting subsequent shifts in representations of the male body, masculinity and spectatorship (Nixon:1996, Mort:1996, Edwards:1997). While magazines such as *Esquire* and *Playboy* were at the forefront of targeting heterosexual men through the promotion of women's bodies and a bachelor lifestyle, 1980s British magazines such as *The Face*, *GQ*, and *Arena* used the male body as an image of consumer desire through advertising, fashion and music culture, targeting heterosexual male readers with feminised and homoerotic images of male bodies. Homoerotic images of the male body in British style magazines generated a

shift in cultural consciousness that has continued to the present day, with the male body increasingly being portrayed as a subject of desire in men's lifestyle magazines. Nixon has outlined how *The Face* contributed to such shifts and shaped a new breed of male readers, allowing new visual codes of representation that positioned the male body as an image for consumer desire (Nixon:1996:136).

The launch of glossy men's magazines such as *The Face*, *GQ* and *Arena* in the 1980s positioned men as style conscious consumer audiences, with advertisers using homoerotic imagery to target products to heterosexual readers. However, alongside the influence of advertisers in shifting the parameters of representation was the rise of gay consumer audiences. Susan Bordo has claimed that it was the gay market that triggered an expansion in images of the sexualised male body, and that gay cultural codes introduced representations of the homoerotic male body (Bordo:1999:183). Susan Faludi has also noted the appropriation of gay culture by heterosexual men's magazines through the particular example of *Details* magazine, a gay men's title that was bought by publishing house Conde Nast in the 1990s in order to re-brand the product as heterosexual, thus expanding the consumer basis while maintaining gay cultural influence (Faludi:2000:507). Faludi claims that the rise of 'ornamental masculinity' drew upon gay cultural codes and that 'Conde Nast had bought the old *Details* because the magazine's gay fashion sense seemed like an ideal vehicle, once the gay aspect was muted, for selling ornamentality to a much larger population of straight men' (Faludi:2000:525). In her work on *The Male Body* Bordo also used the example



of Calvin Klein to demonstrate how fashion houses appropriated gay cultural codes to sell products to heterosexual and gay markets, using ‘...what is known in the trade as a ‘dual marketing’ approach’ (Bordo:1999:182). The examples provided by *Details* magazine and Calvin Klein advertising highlight the perceived profitability of the male body as an object of consumer desire in the late 1980s, and the ways that gay men were viewed as sophisticated consumers of fashion that could lend ideas to target heterosexual male markets. As Bordo states, ‘*Playboy* initiated the objectification of women, and fashion has done so with men. The 1950s allowed a chest fest, but today adverts go lower down’ (Bordo:1999:168).

## **Bodybuilding, Fitness and *Men’s Health* Magazine**

As a men’s lifestyle magazine, *Men’s Health* can be seen to draw upon a variety of traditions. While lads’ magazines such as *FHM* can clearly be set in the tradition of men’s general interest magazines such as *Esquire*, soft-core pornographic titles such as *Playboy*, and also the British style and fashion press, *Men’s Health* also draws upon wider health and fitness culture. Men’s fitness magazines date back to the start of the twentieth century with the bodybuilding magazine *Physical Culture* (1903). *Physical Culture* promoted bodybuilding throughout Europe and America, and it was in this magazine that the infamous Charles Atlas saw an advertisement for the ‘World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man’ competition, which he won in 1922 (*SandowMuseum.Com*, ‘Charles Atlas’, accessed 04.03.04). During the 1940s bodybuilding grew in popularity and bodybuilding magazines such as *Your Physique* in 1940 (later re-branded as

*Muscle Builder*, and then *Muscle and Fitness*), and *Muscle Power* in 1945 appeared as specialist bodybuilding titles. While *Men's Health* is not a bodybuilding title, the emphasis placed upon weight lifting and fitness training in the sculpting of the body holds links with the tradition of bodybuilding.

Magazines such as *Muscle and Fitness* incorporated advice from a variety of areas from weight training to nutrition and grooming, all aimed towards the goal of perfecting the inner and outer body to the standards of competitive bodybuilding (*Bodybuilding.com*, 'Interview with Joe Weider', accessed 03.01.05). Through the example of *Muscle and Fitness* we can see how bodybuilding magazines have diversified to reflect a variety of lifestyle issues related to the body and consumption. *Muscle and Fitness* is the flagship title of American Media Inc (AMI), owned by publishing tycoon and bodybuilding enthusiast Joe Weider who is widely regarded as the founding father of modern bodybuilding. During 1985 AMI branched out into the world of health, fitness and nutrition through magazines such as *Men's Fitness* (launched in the UK during 1999), and Rodale soon followed suit with the launch of *Men's Health* in 1986 (launched in the UK in 1995). Both *Men's Health* and *Men's Fitness* have extended the boundaries of bodybuilding magazines, utilising the growing general interest in health, gym culture and the muscular male body whilst evading the muscular excess of competitive bodybuilding. Both *Men's Fitness* and *Men's Health* have combined the successful format of men's lifestyle magazines (consumer culture, women and fashion) with an interest in gym culture, sport, and health in order to target a wider male audience.



However, there remains a significant gap in the sales figures of these two titles in the UK, and between 2002-2004 *Men's Fitness* achieved sales between 50,000-62,000 copies sold per month in comparison with *Men's Health* at 217,000-221,000 for the same period (Mintel:2004:Figure 11).

## The Rise of Lads' Magazines

Sean Nixon has described publishers' search for a popular UK men's lifestyle magazine as 'looking for the holy grail', with advertisers searching for a winning formula to target men who were previously seen as 'elusive' and 'difficult' consumers (Nixon:1996:129). While magazines such as *The Face*, *Arena* and *GQ* initiated changes in representation and spectatorship by positioning men as homoerotic consumers in the 1980s, it was the subsequent rise of the lads' magazine in the 1990s that firmly placed heterosexual men as the prime target audience for fashion, grooming and consumer goods. The mid 1990s saw the media hail the rise of the 'new lad', an excessive form of masculinity that was seen to revel in sexism and the display of women's bodies as objects of sexual titillation. Most significantly, during 1994 there was the launch of lads' magazine *Loaded* in the UK by IPC media. Nick Stevenson, Peter Jackson and Kate Brooks credit *Loaded* with the change that took place in the 1990s men's magazine market and with turning the men's lifestyle magazine into distinct and popular mass consumer products (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks:2001). They state that,

The use of laddish irony, which became common currency within *Loaded*'s celebration of popular culture and masculinity, changed the face of men's magazine publishing. The later emergence of *Maxim* and *FHM* both borrowed from and reinvented the visual economy of *Loaded* (Stevenson, Jackson and Brooks:2001:371).

The economic success of *Loaded* influenced the re-launch of older style magazines such as *FHM*, *Esquire*, *GQ* and *Arena*, magazines that had previously focused upon men's lifestyle through fashion and style. *FHM* (*For Him Magazine*) was initially launched in 1987 by Tayvale as a men's fashion and style magazine, and was bought out by Emap during 1991. With the launch and success of *Loaded* in 1994, *FHM* subsequently adopted the style of the lads' magazine, using a mixture of women, fashion, consumer culture, celebrity, irony and prurient humour to sell to the growing magazine consumer audience of men between 18-34 years of age. As Bethan Benwell states, *FHM*,

Shifted their appeal down-market in line with *Loaded*'s success. The shift within the market represented, in many ways, a backlash against the figure of the middle-class, executive, style-conscious 'new man', with its lingering connotations of postfeminist political correctness; in this way the new lad seemed to be reacting against both middle-class culture and feminism (Benwell:2004:6).

Taking influences from *Loaded*, *FHM* quickly established itself as the top selling British men's magazine, with peak sales figures hitting 775,000 per month in 1998 (Mintel:2000:Figure 10).

The idea of the lad is caught up with overturning political correctness, the use of prurient humour and the celebration of masculinity through the objectification of 'Others'. The 'new lad' rebelled against earlier concepts of the 'new man' that



circulated in the British media during the late 1970s and 1980s. Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks state that,

According to Achilles Heel, the new man was ‘born in the 1970s ... professional, usually white, heterosexual and between 25 and indeterminate middle age. He is ... having somewhat of an identity crisis as his girlfriend(s) discover feminism’ (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks:2001:33).

The ‘new lad’ was seen to rebel against conceptions of the ‘new man’ as nurturing and narcissistic, and employed regressively sexist attitudes towards women as sexual objects. Furthermore, as noted earlier by Benwell, the ‘new lad’ was a backlash against middle class masculinities, and we can see expression of this in representations of the grotesque (a concept that will be explored in Chapter 7). Both the ‘new man’ and the ‘new lad’ were arguably largely media driven concepts that sparked subsequent changes in notions of masculinity and representations of the male body. Despite being such distinct and apparently incommensurable terms Mark Simpson has stated that,

New Man and New Lad, apparently antagonistic phenomena, were in fact intimately related – both were the offspring of glossy magazine culture. Both were also about a kind of commodified masculine self-consciousness that stemmed from insecurity and rootlessness – though, ironically, New Lad was much more successful in selling men fashion and vanity products than New Man (Simpson, ‘Metrosexual, That Rings a Bell’, accessed 22.06.03).

In spite of the apparent backlash towards feminism and emotive masculinities, lads’ magazines have maintained images of the homoerotic male body in their vast advertising space, and in fashion and grooming editorials. Writers such as Edwards have noted the ambiguity between homoerotic images and heterosexual readers of men’s lifestyle magazines, stating that men’s lifestyle magazines in the 1990s became defensively heterosexual in order to counteract gay imagery, and subsequently ‘...[stirred] up anxieties on numerous levels’ (Edwards:1997:76).

During the 1990s men's lifestyle magazines became the fastest growing sector within the magazine publishing industry. As market researchers, Mintel state, 'the UK men's magazine market grew by 220% in volume and 267% in value between 1995 - 1999' (Mintel:2000:1). However, since the start of the new millennium the rate of growth in the men's lifestyle magazine market has stalled. With the slow-down in sales of lads' magazines, publishing houses have looked at ways to diversify the interest in their products. While the cultural climate of the 1990s was obsessed with the phenomenon of 'new lads' and 'ladettes', writers such as Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks highlight how by the turn of the new millennium, the popular press were declaring the 'death' of lad culture (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks:2001:1). Yet despite the downturn in sales since the 1990s, *FHM* continues to sell around 600,000 copies of their magazine per month, and alongside this we must remember that such figures do not necessarily reflect their true audience (since sales do not automatically equate with readership and do not take into account the sharing of magazines). *FHM* remains the top selling British men's magazine, and although the women's lifestyle magazine market is more profitable than the men's magazine market as a whole in the UK, taken alone *FHM* equals monthly sales figures of top selling women's glossy magazine *Glamour*, and achieves higher monthly sales than popular women's titles such as *Marie Claire* and *Cosmopolitan* which sell approximately 380,000 and 460,000 magazines respectively ([abc.org.uk](http://abc.org.uk), 'Summary Report', accessed 08.08.05). It was suggested by the market research group Mintel that, 'this rapid growth rate would, of course, slow at some point, and the period since 1998 (when Mintel last reported on the market) has been one of *consolidation* amid wider recognition *that men's lifestyle magazines are more than a*



*temporary phenomenon*' (Mintel:2000:1. Original emphasis). Despite the noted enthusiasm of the press to declare the end of lad culture at the turn of the millennium, there has been a renewal of interest in lads' magazines with the launch of weekly titles such as *Nuts* and *Zoo*, the rising popularity of men's magazine websites, and also wider media interest in *FHM*'s 'Grooming Awards' and beauty contests such as *FHM*'s 'High Street Honeys'.

## **Diversification: black men's magazines and men's magazine websites**

So far, the tradition of men's magazines discussed has focused upon the production of white masculinities. While magazines such as *FHM* and *Men's Health* do not claim to be 'white' magazines, a close reading of both titles reveals bias towards the cultures of white masculinities, with the representational framework focusing particularly on white bodies. Of course, black men and women have entered the pages of *FHM* and *Men's Health*, most notably through interviews with black television, movie, music and sports stars, and also with respect to advertising. Nevertheless, the image of 'lads' is primarily white, and as I outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, I will place focus upon the mediated construction and representation of white masculinities. What is significant here is the lack of men's magazines that are aimed towards men of ethnic minorities in the UK. In 1998 black men's magazine *Untold* was launched, a UK based title that adopted the format of the men's lifestyle magazine, using the consumer framework of fashion, celebrity culture and women to target a young black male audience. *Untold's*

editor, Peter Akinti told *Black News Media* that ‘*Untold* is not just another male magazine to join the already crowded shelves. It is the only, and the first, lifestyle magazine for UK-based black men. *Untold* is different from the current black press - our tone is confident and knowing’ (*Black News Media*, ‘The Half’s Now Been Untold’, accessed 27.07.03). It is not my intention to trace the history of black magazines in this chapter, however it is important to note the significant gap in providing lifestyle magazines for black male consumers in the UK. While there are British based magazines marketed towards black men such as *Untold* and *Drum* (launched 2003), the majority of magazines on the market aimed at black men are imported American products (such as *Black Men*, *King* or black music magazine *Vibe*).

Since the late 1990s, *FHM* and *Men’s Health* have extended their brand image through publication of spin-off titles such as *FHM Bionic*, *FHM Fashion*, the *Men’s Health Manual* and the *Men’s Health Belly Off Programme*, alongside the expansion of their website domains *FHM.com* and *menshealth.co.uk*. The launch of these spin-off titles, and the subsequent creation of new men’s weekly magazines such as *Nuts* and *Zoo* in 2004 can be seen to demonstrate a belief in the profitability of men’s magazines by magazine publishing houses. While *FHM Bionic* (*FHM*’s fitness title) proved to be unsuccessful, closing production during 2002, men’s weekly magazines have proved very popular in terms of sales. The top selling weekly men’s magazines *Nuts* and *Zoo* have launched a variety of successful television advertising campaigns and have seen



sales in excess of 200,000 copies weekly. Journalist Owen Gibson reported in *The Guardian* that,

On a monthly basis, the figures show that between them the new men's weeklies have confounded expectations and doubled the size of the men's magazines market. Most industry insiders thought the magazines would do well, but mostly at the expense of the monthly men's titles (Gibson, 'Naked Women, Cars and Sports Help Double Sales of Lad's Mags', accessed 12.09.04).

However, as I have already suggested, monthly men's magazines remain popular, and magazine sales remain consistently high for both *FHM* and *Men's Health* at around 600,000 and 200,000 per month respectively.

In consolidating their brand image, *FHM* and *Men's Health* have used the context of the internet to attract consumers, and have built communities around the concepts of masculinity and homosocial bonding. *FHM.com* has free subscription for all users, although there are areas of the website that have incorporated pay-per-view access, such as the viewing of women who are naked and 'uncut', *FHM* gambling, and the new launch of *FHM Digital* during 2005, an added variant of the *FHM* reading experience that replicates the printed magazine title to the online environment as a pay-per-view product.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, *menshealth.co.uk* has incorporated a pay structure in their website for access to a *Men's Health* 'personal trainer', where readers gain tips on fitness and exercise that is built around their personal specifications, and *Men's Health* also provide additional benefits for magazine subscribers who are able to download a variety

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<sup>1</sup> The *Men's Health Digital Edition* was also launched in November 2005 (the November 2005 issue was run as a free trial). However, the launch of *Men's Health Digital Edition* arrived too late to be taken into consideration for the analysis that figures in my research.

of fitness articles and demonstrations. The branching out into soft-core pornography and gambling in *FHM*, and into personal training in *Men's Health* can be seen as rather obvious extensions to the ways that the individual brands are constructed for consumers. Although both titles take the format of the men's lifestyle magazine, promoting consumer desires and tips on sex, fashion and grooming, there are distinct differences between *FHM* and *Men's Health* that lie in their respective emphases upon lad culture and fitness culture.

While *FHM* is widely regarded as a lads' magazine, *Men's Health* label their brand as a 'men's quality lifestyle magazine' inciting comparison with fellow rivals *GQ* and *Esquire* in their 2005 Media Pack (*Men's Health* Online Media Pack 2005). Since their respective launches at the turn of the new millennium, the websites *FHM.com* and *menshealth.co.uk* have developed the concept of community through providing space for readers to interact with one another in the context of the magazine, legitimizing reflection on masculinities and bonding with other men. At the forefront of interactive men's magazines websites has been *menshealth.co.uk*, where vast numbers of message boards attract large numbers of readers on a daily basis, with figures during April 2003 showing 292,370 unique users online (*Men's Health* Media Pack 2004). Since 2003, *menshealth.co.uk* has continued to grow with over 400,000 unique users logging onto the website per month (*menshealth.co.uk*, via e-mail correspondence, July 2005). The structure of *menshealth.co.uk* encourages discussion between men and reflection upon issues relating to lifestyle, emotions and identity. In contrast, *FHM.com* provides small



space for reader dialogues, being primarily a visual site that reinforces concepts of pleasurable consumption through focus on the 'Other'. Nevertheless, *FHM.com* is a very popular website with 1,679,762 unique users generating 31,577,848 monthly page impressions (Emap Advertising:2005). Indeed, *FHM* publishers *Emap* state that, 'FHM.com is the biggest men's magazine website in the world and the PPA Consumer Website of the Year' (Emap Advertising:2005). The market for men's online magazines is growing, and despite an initial slowdown in the growth of the men's internet magazine sector during 2001 (which later saw the close of *Uploaded.com*, the website of *Loaded* magazine in 2002) we can see examples of how men's magazines are embracing diversification. Indeed, with respect to *Uploaded.com*, during 2004 there was a re-launch of a website for *Loaded* magazine in the form of *Loaded.com*. Men's magazine websites have provided men with the space to reflect upon and explore masculinities, using interactive features to extend reading relations beyond the printed page.

## **Shifting Masculinities: The Gentleman to the 'Metrosexual'**

The evolution of men's magazines can be read alongside cultural shifts in notions of hegemonic masculinity. From the 'gentleman' onwards, different forms of masculinity have asserted dominance over the range of possible masculinities, and so since the 1970s we have moved from conceptions of the 'breadwinner' through the 'bachelor',

the ‘new man’, the ‘new lad’, and since the new millennium, the increased presence of the ‘metrosexual’.<sup>2</sup> Mark Simpson is commonly credited with first coining the term while writing for *The Independent* in the mid-1990s and attempting to describe the rise of men who were conscious of their bodies, fashion and beauty. Simpson has more recently stated that,

The typical metrosexual is a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that's where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference [...] For some time now, old-fashioned (re)productive, repressed, unmoisturized heterosexuality has been given the pink slip by consumer capitalism (Simpson, ‘Meet the Metrosexual’, accessed 22.07.02).

The constructed image of the metrosexual is apparent in *Men's Health* where men are body conscious and are drawn as conscious consumers of fashion and grooming. Yet as Andrew Parker and Samantha Lyle have noted, despite differences in terms of social class, many masculine identities such as those characterized above share the common denominator of identification through consumption of specific goods, services and products (Parker and Lyle:2005). However, there are also points of key distinction, and, as this thesis will indicate through examination of the two websites, the full force of metrosexuality is resisted in *FHM* where lad culture reinforces a split between heterosexual and gay sexuality, and remains strong in the objectification of women as sexual objects.

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<sup>2</sup> Following on from the notion of the ‘metrosexual’ the term ‘ubersexual’ has been used to describe an increased individualised attitude towards fashion, the reclamation of macho masculinity and an increased awareness of politics/current events. For a thorough description of this term see Salzman, M. Matathia, I. and O'Reilly, A. (2005) *The Future of Men*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.



In this chapter I have discussed the tradition of men's lifestyle magazines, locating some of the central influences on the production of *FHM* and *Men's Health* and highlighting shifts in conceptions of masculinity. I will now turn to trace the debates on the male gaze and the representation of male bodies. Men's lifestyle magazines have provided valuable spaces for the display of the male body, aided in particular by the need to meet the expectations of consumer advertising and the fashion industry. In the next chapter I will trace the key texts that have influenced my work in this thesis on the representation of the male body and the male gaze as they have been applied to media and cultural studies.



# Chapter 2

## Theorising the Gaze and Representation

My research on men's lifestyle magazines represents a comparative exploration of two distinct men's magazines, and the points of convergence/divergence in the articulation of white heterosexual masculinities. This chapter is intended to set the context and focus for subsequent analytical work on the idealized male body in Chapter 6, where I examine the ways that heterosexual men are positioned in relation to images of eroticised, muscular male bodies and discourses of health and fitness. The ways that we watch, read and interpret women's bodies have been extensively questioned by feminist academics whose work has aimed to understand the discursive repertoires that impact upon representations of women's bodies and conceptions of femininity in media culture. Academic work on the gaze, representation and magazine cultures is vast, and therefore this chapter presents a very selective overview of certain key thinkers and thematic issues that have influenced my own work. Through the analysis of two concepts of the gaze (Foucault's disciplinary gaze and Mulvey's male gaze) I will outline how 'gazes' have been located in this project, and I will attenuate multiple notions of the gaze (narcissistic as well as fetishistic) as they relate to the positioning of masculinities in men's lifestyle magazines. After the consideration of Foucault, Mulvey and related work on conceptions of the gaze, I then move to a discussion of work on magazine cultures (men's and women's), the notion of 'whiteness', and then finally

debates on bodybuilding and the muscular male body as sites of ambivalence in relation to perceptions of the idealized and grotesque body.

## Identifying Two Gazes: The Work of Michel Foucault and Laura Mulvey

### Foucault, Discipline and Surveillance

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault claimed that medical discourses traversed what was visible and invisible, and that the clinical gaze penetrated and objectified bodies in the claim to medical knowledge (Foucault:1989). The medicalisation of the body was part of what Foucault later elaborated upon as disciplinary regimes of power, reinforcing power through claims to knowledge, self-surveillance and the care of the self. In *Technologies of the Self*, Foucault stated that ‘permanent medical care is one of the central features of the care of the self. One must become the doctor of oneself’ (Foucault:1988:31). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault elaborated on the importance of the gaze through the analysis of regimes of discipline that created docile bodies. Citing the example of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon as a revolutionary invention that transformed regulation in prisons, reducing prisoners to a state of ‘permanent visibility’, Foucault stated that,

The panopticon, on the other hand, must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning: a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday lives of men [...] it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form ... (Foucault:1991:205).



According to Foucault, regimes of discipline brought about cultural shifts in institutional power, and generated docile bodies: bodies that have learned techniques of self-surveillance and internalised a disciplinary gaze. Foucault further linked the penetration of the surveying gaze to regimes of power, and stated that, 'it is a power that seems all the less 'corporeal' in that it is more subtly physical' (Foucault:1991:177).

Foucault's writing on discipline, surveillance and the gaze bears relevance to my work on representations of the male body in *Men's Health*, a magazine that uses discourses of fitness and health alongside medical/scientific terminology to portray the body as a work in progress. In Chapter 6 I draw upon Foucauldian ideas of the gaze and question how discourses of discipline and self-surveillance are relevant to an understanding of how men's (inner and outer) bodies are positioned and regulated in men's magazines.

The production of the subject as a discursive effect of power has been influential to writers such as Judith Butler who have complicated notions of sex and gender in deconstructing the essentialism and dualisms of sex and gender distinctions. While I will not draw upon Butler's work in this thesis, it is necessary to notice the importance of Foucault for the analysis of gender relations (even if this work serves to undermine such perceptions). In his own work Foucault did not address gender, and has been criticised by many feminists for failing to adequately address questions of gender and

agency.<sup>1</sup> In her analysis of the criticisms levelled at Foucault, Lynne Segal stated that, ‘Foucault addresses the body and its pleasures as the target of technologies of surveillance, but he tells us almost nothing about those bodies, or about the pleasures being controlled and regulated. The body is thus disembodied...’ (Segal:1997:211). Nevertheless, Foucault’s work has remained extremely influential for feminists such as Susan Bordo (a writer whose work I have frequently drawn upon in this thesis), who, working with the body, outlined the relevance of Foucault’s discursive effects of power that ‘...produces and normalises bodies to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination’ (Bordo:1993:190). In my own research I have found Foucault’s work relevant in understanding how power is dispersed through bodies, and precisely for taking into account power relations at the localised level.<sup>2</sup> This thesis does not represent a Foucauldian project, yet Foucault’s work on power, discipline and the gaze has helped me to negotiate the ways in which discourses impact upon the production of bodies/texts. In Chapter 6 I will examine regimes of discipline as they threaten to control the male body through the power of the gaze, yet while men can be read as subjected to power, they also embody positions of power, and are indeed empowered through the ability to take an active part in online magazine communities (this is discussed in Chapter 8).

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of criticism on Foucault, gender and agency see work by Fraser:1989, Hartstock:1990, Grimshaw:1993 and Connell:1995.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault’s writings on power will be discussed in Chapter 5.



## Mulvey and the Male Gaze

In her influential essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (hereafter cited as *Visual Pleasure*) published in 1975, Laura Mulvey used a psychoanalytic framework to outline her thoughts on spectatorship and visual pleasure, and provided an analysis of how women's bodies were positioned on the cinema screen for audiences. From the outset of *Visual Pleasure*, Mulvey stated her own positioning as a feminist, and used psychoanalysis as a political weapon to unpack the relations of visual pleasure. Using a combination of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Mulvey claimed that male desire was dependent upon the image of the castrated woman, so that,

Woman then stands in a patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning (Mulvey:1999a:59).

According to Mulvey, women's bodies offer audiences scopophilic pleasure through voyeurism and fetishism, and that as a result of social and psychic gender relations, women's bodies connote 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey:1999a:63). In *Visual Pleasure*, the cinema screen was seen to indulge audiences in voyeurism/fetishism (of women as objects) and narcissism (through identification with male characters). In the male gaze, women's bodies bare the look of the spectator, allowing male fantasies to be projected, and Mulvey stated that 'women's desire is subjugated to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound; she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it' (Mulvey:1999a:59).

There is one central quote from Mulvey that is pertinent to my work in this thesis, and the ways that the male body can be positioned in the context of the male gaze. Mulvey stated that, 'according to the principals of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like' (Mulvey:1999a:63).

The idea that the male body cannot be subjected to the male gaze has sparked controversy, most particularly with regard to gay sexual desire and the homoerotic male body. The increasing representation of naked and near naked male bodies in the mainstream media since the 1980s has drawn inevitable criticism of Mulvey's conception of the male gaze, inciting questions of where the sexualised male body lies in reading relations. In this thesis I will question the relevance of Mulvey's concepts in representations of the male body, and will analyse whether men's bodies can be objectified for the gaze of heterosexual male consumers in ways that scrutinise and render them passive in viewing relations.

The projection of fantasy, desire and visual pleasure onto women's bodies was significant in recognising how women were positioned as sexual objects and denied the status of active subjects in viewing/reading relations. Through the concept of the male gaze many feminists have deconstructed phallogentric culture and examined the ways that desire and pleasure have functioned to render women as passive. While Mulvey's own work has focused mainly upon cinema, her theory of the male gaze has provided a basis for wider work on visual representation in media, art and cultural studies. In this



thesis it is adopted as a framework for analysing the process of male spectatorship in relation to both women's bodies and men's bodies as desirable, and through the male gaze I will question the status of the male body as a desiring subject. I also analyse the shift to multiple gazes (narcissistic as well as fetishistic) and I question how such gazes define multivariate constructions of white hegemonic masculinities. Mulvey's work stands at odds with Foucault's writings on discipline, power and the subject, and while I adopt neither a straightforward Foucauldian nor a psychoanalytic perspective, both writers have helped me to identify how multivariate 'gazes' are implicit in representation in ways that construct relations of power.

Mulvey's work on the male gaze is outdated in many respects, and it has been criticised and challenged on numerous levels: for overlooking the tensions/pleasures that arise for lesbian and gay spectators (Arbutnot and Seneca:1981, Neale:1983, Gaines:1986); with respect to charges of essentialism, the production of gendered binaries and lack of audience agency (de Lauretis:1984, Gledhill:1999, Stacey:1999); and for failing to take into account the specifics of black oppression (Gaines:1986, hooks:1999). However, I have revisited Mulvey's work in this thesis as a basis to self-consciously understand the white heterosexual male spectator/reader position. I have returned to the male gaze as one way to examine the relations of reading in the culture of men's magazines where gender relations at first appear to be structured in ways that render men as active voyeurs (who identify directly with the magazine culture) and women as passive objects of sexual desire. In turning around Mulvey's original arguments I will discuss how

there are now multiple male gazes that exist between men, and I will also outline their apparent obverse in a male gaze that is defined by narcissistic/fetishistic versions of grotesque/excess. I now turn to a consideration of some specific criticisms of Mulvey's male gaze in ways relevant to this project insofar as they relate to the homoerotic body, audience negotiation and the positioning of black spectators.

### Criticisms of Mulvey's Work on the Male Gaze

Writing on the homoerotic male body in cinema, Steve Neale took issue with Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze and her blinkered focus upon women's bodies from the viewpoint of heterosexual masculinity. In *Masculinity as Spectacle*, Neale analysed the male body in film, accounting for the desire that surrounded the homoerotic male body and the capacity for a homosocial gaze. Drawing upon earlier work by John Ellis who had criticised Mulvey's concept of gender identification, Neale stated that, 'cinema draws on and involves many desires, many forms of desire. And desire itself is mobile, fluid, constantly transgressing identities, positions and roles. Identifications are multiple, fluid, at points even contradictory' (Neale:1983:4). Despite the criticisms that he outlined, Neale agreed with Mulvey's '...basic premise that the spectatorial look in mainstream cinema is implicitly male' (Neale:1983:15). However Neale did not conflate femininity and women's bodies, claiming that male bodies can also be feminised and subjected as 'the object of an erotic look' (Neale:1983:14). Not only could male bodies be coded as feminised and erotic, but homosexuality was also a constant undercurrent in cinema that was culturally and psychically repressed.



According to Neale, it was such repression that had resulted in the lack of research into representations of masculinity both inside and outside of cinema. Placed in context, Neale's essay on *Masculinity as Spectacle* was significant in generating debate on the male body, representation and spectatorship. Mulvey had earlier addressed critics of the male gaze in her essay *Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, where she suggested that women's bifurcated consciousness oscillated between male and female spectator viewpoints, creating what she termed a 'transvestite' positioning for women spectators (Mulvey:1999b:125). However, once again the male gaze was criticised for its essentialism and dependence upon conceptions of heterosexuality. While Neale did not counter the foundation of Mulvey's arguments on the male gaze, he did at least attempt to account for the display of the erotic male body in cinema, representation and spectatorship, and for the male-male gaze.

Many feminist academics have focused upon the lack of agency credited to women spectators in Mulvey's analysis, and the lack of space provided for disruption and negotiation in viewing relations or for 'reading against the grain' (de Lauretis:1984). In particular, Gledhill criticised the notion of the male gaze for providing a negative view of the female spectatorship and for '...suggesting colonized, alienated or masochistic positions of identification' (Gledhill:1999:168). In her essay, *Pleasurable Negotiations*, Gledhill introduced the idea of audience resistance and negotiation in the reading of images, and explored women's subjectivity in relations of reading. Gledhill warned against deterministic viewpoints and stated that 'meaning is neither imposed, nor

passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience' (Gledhill:1999:169). Similarly, in her work on *Feminine Fascinations* Jackie Stacey challenged the passivity of women spectators, outlining the diversity and complexity of audience interpretation and identification. In the analysis of spectatorship and identification, Stacey highlighted the need to acknowledge audience subjectivity, stating that, 'if we take audiences as a starting point for understanding the consumption of stars, the active and productive elements of the star-audience relationships begin to emerge' (Stacey:1999:208).

The positioning of audiences and space for negotiation/multivariate interpretation is important to consider in film and media research. While I have employed Mulvey's concepts to analyse the male gaze (and its subversion) I also acknowledge the importance of audience response. In this thesis I have analysed audience relations in magazine cultures through non-participant observation of reader's online dialogues. The growing popularity of the internet as a site for the construction of online communities has led to shifts in audience reading relations towards more direct forms of collective readership, and these are taken up as subjects for debate in Chapter 4 and Chapter 8. However, my analysis of visual texts uses a mixture of semiology, discourse analysis and limited application of psychoanalysis (via concepts of the male gaze and abjection) in order to analyse and unpack the production of texts and to understand representation at the semiotic/discursive level. The direction of my project is to analyse both production and negotiation as they exist independently of the research context (via



the internet), and a full rationale for this approach will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Women are not rendered passive spectators in this project, although as we will come to see, women are often seen as complicit in the objectification of their bodies (via interactive participation on the internet). In Chapter 8 I identify how women are active in online communities, as well as the ways that they are positioned as sexual objects in male dominated spaces.

A final set of criticisms that have been levelled at Mulvey's writings on the male gaze have come from the perspective of black reader/spectators, and bell hooks has noted the significance of external social, cultural and historical forces that have shaped black spectator positions (hooks:1999). Working with Stuart Hall's call for 'recognition of our agency as black spectators', hooks outlined the resistance offered by a re-working of the gaze for black people, whose history has produced a 'rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze' (hooks:1999:308). In her work on *The Oppositional Gaze*, hooks wrote about the potential for resistance to white male supremacy through the gaze of the black spectator, inserting the notion of agency into spectator positions that took account of cultural and social positioning. According to hooks, the oppositional gaze related to a critical space in Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, where binary oppositions needed to be deconstructed and racial positioning opened out for their disruptive potential. hooks has stated that through, 'looking at films with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of phallogentric gaze and chose not to identify with either the

victim or the perpetrator' (hooks:1999:313). hooks claimed that black women have been 'abused' by the male gaze, and that theoretical space needed to be opened out for black women's voices to read 'against the grain' (hooks:1999:315-6).

The idea of the male gaze bears relevance to a reading of media culture, yet many writers have suggested the terms of the male gaze must be complexified to allow for a variety of gazes and spectator positions that take into account the social and cultural effects of power relations. In my work I intend to observe the power dynamics that exist between the positioning of white heterosexual men and 'Others', and the ways in which 'Others' are both positioned by magazines, and position themselves, in the relations of reading through the extended site of magazine message boards. I also question the gaze as it relates to men who are positioned as hegemonically powerful, and I analyse the gazes that are drawn upon between white heterosexual male readers in the construction of heterosexual male homosocial spaces.

## **Feminism and Women's Magazines**

There has been a vast amount of feminist work on the positioning of women and adolescent girls in the media since the late 1970s, and there is now an extended set of literatures on both women's and men's magazine cultures. It is not possible to attempt a complete overview of such a large area of academic research, and indeed any claim to do so would necessarily be limited. I will therefore provide a selective overview of key



themes that have emerged from writings on women's magazines since the late 1970s in order to frame the subsequent analyses of the rise of men's lifestyle magazines. While I will not study women's magazines in this thesis, the work of feminists on women and representation has been at the forefront of research into gender and magazines cultures since the 1970s.

As Mary Jane Kehily suggests, feminist scholarship on women's magazines can be split into two broad camps 'textual analysis focusing on the magazine and its associative meanings, and audience ethnography exploring the ways in which readers make sense of the text' (Kehily:1999:66). Feminist research in the 1970s and 1980s opened space for the ways in which women's magazines positioned women as objects of sexual desire as well as the audience response from women to discourses of romance (Winship:1987, Ferguson:1983, McRobbie:1999). Such research largely marked women as complicit with the 'cult of femininity', rendering women subordinate and passive to patriarchal ideologies. From the late 1980s and into the 1990s feminists started to trace the shifts in women's magazines from romance to more dominant forms of sexuality, moving from the realm of feminine ideologies into discursive fields of production. In revising her previous work on girls' magazines, Angela McRobbie has taken a positive outlook on the role of women's magazines as more 'transparently self-reflexive' and caught up with conceptions of 'self-improvement'. McRobbie has claimed that the influence of feminism and new codes of representation have portrayed women as more aware of their sexualities, and that,

This new form of ironic femininity allows readers to participate in all the conventional and gender stereotypical rituals of femininity without finding themselves trapped into traditional gender-subordinate positions [...] The magazines also mock themselves, and the whole culture of femininity becomes more transparent and self-reflexive (McRobbie:1999:53).

However, in her work on *Representing Women*, Myra MacDonald has suggested that in the 1990s women's magazines 'co-opted' and 'recuperated' a feminist ethic within a wider culture that continued to objectify women's bodies. McDonald stated that 'the compromise [was] to adopt the surface terminology, without taking on the ideology that underpins it' (Macdonald:1995:91). Similarly, Sherrie Inness has used the concept of recuperation to claim that although tough women are occasionally depicted in women's magazines, images often correspond with a more general sexy but tough image, or the idea of being 'pretty tough' (Inness:1999:51).

In contemporary media culture, producers continue to use women's bodies as the basis for communicating sexual desire and fantasy, and while women's magazines have opened up (or recuperated) areas for the expression of women's independence, men's magazines (and particularly lads' magazines) have adopted rather regressive modes of representing women as sexual objects of desire. In Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 I examine how women enter the terrain of men's lifestyle magazines, and I offer a reading of the production of hypersexuality in terms of the grotesque. In my discussion of the male body, I analyse how men's bodies have also been subjected to forms of scrutiny that have traditionally been associated with women (in constructions of the male gaze and through representation in women's magazines). Men's magazines have traditionally



been seen as distinct from women's magazines, most particularly in terms of the aggressive sexuality associated with lads' magazines. However, there have been shifts towards more emotive masculinities in websites such as *menshealth.co.uk*, where heterosexual male personae discuss a range of issues from relationships to grooming and fashion. In providing forms of collective identity that use the body as a site for identification, are self-reflective and which also include affective dialogues, men's magazines such as *Men's Health* and *menshealth.co.uk* have taken some influence from the genre of women's magazines.

Feminist work on women's magazines and forms of readership have not only opened up a set of debates on the status of women's bodies and femininity in media culture, but have also provided analytical tools that have been taken up as influences in later work on men's magazines. Alongside analysis of the semiotic field, feminists have engaged in ethnographic audience research, with classic studies by writers such as Janice Radway, Angela McRobbie and Joke Hermes outlining how women relate to texts both on a personal everyday level and as imagined 'interpretative communities' (Hermes:1995, Radway:1995, McRobbie:1999). Research on women's magazines has shown both collective and individual reading/audience practices that have been distinct from men's magazines, and in Chapter 8 I discuss how men's magazines have now become a site for collective readership through the advent of online magazine websites. In outlining men's online magazines as communities, I question the investment that men have in men's magazines as collective homosocial spaces. In her ethnographic

research on *Reading Women's Magazines*, Joke Hermes analysed how women audiences read women's magazines as 'a theory of everyday media use' (Hermes:1995:64). From conducting 80 interviews, Hermes found that although women's magazines allowed women to 'invest in temporary and imaginary identities', magazines did not hold status in their everyday lives (Hermes:1995:64). Hermes stated that,

Women's magazines constitute a genre that does not make demands: they can easily be picked up and put down again [...] Women's magazines, I would argue, are typically second-choice reading matter that adapt to a noisy background, to other obligations, they are read more for their adaptability than their content (Hermes:1995:34).

While the content of women's magazines and men's magazine contrast in structure, content and in the targeting of audiences (as women and men), both genres often use popular culture as a basis from which to construct gender identities. In their research on men's magazines, Peter Jackson, Nick Stevenson and Kate Brooks outlined how men made 'sense' of men's magazines through a variety of discursive repertoires that included the perception that magazines were 'harmless fun' (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks:2001). Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks stated that, 'far from being offended, most participants argued that the magazines were 'just entertainment', 'not very harmful ... just a bit of fun'. Occasionally, readers admitted to a sense of embarrassment ...' (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks:2001:122). In my research I question the investments that men hold in the homosocial spaces opened up by men's online magazines. While I do not engage with focus groups or interviews, I analyse investments through dialogues (on affective discourses and calls for brotherhood), and citing the example of



online magazine cultures in *menshealth.co.uk*, I challenge the notion that men are not invested in men's magazines as homosocial spaces.

## **Masculinity, the Male Body and Representation**

During the 1980s and 1990s representations of the male body as desirable became prominent in the mainstream media, with high profile advertising campaigns by companies such as Levi's Jeans and Calvin Klein underwear targeting heterosexual male consumers with the near naked male bodies of models such as Nick Kamen (1985) and Mark Wahlberg (1992). In the last chapter I outlined the rise of men's magazines, paying particular attention to 1980s style and fashion and the subsequent (re)launches of men's lifestyle magazines such as *FHM* and *Men's Health* from the mid 1990s. Dependent upon advertising revenue, men's magazines have been prime spaces for the representation of desirable male bodies, and have led feminists and academics working in the area of men and masculinities to question the status of the male body in representation and the relations of reading. In this section of the chapter I will elaborate upon a selection of such work, and provide an overview of key concepts that have complicated earlier feminist work on the male gaze and media representation. This thesis represents an attempt to re-theorise the semiotics of representation on the eroticised male body (using concepts of the idealized and the grotesque) and will trace the shifting forms of audienceship from the offline to the online magazine format (with a focus upon the emergence of online male speech communities as invested forms of readership). In light of the increasing trend in representing the male body as both

sexual and desirable in advertising and men's magazines, academics started to question the status of masculinity in the relations of reading and the male-male gaze that was being projected.

Whilst recognising the importance of the post-war period, and particularly the 1960s and 1970s for changing conceptions of masculinity through the rise of popular culture, writers such as Jon Stratton, Frank Mort, Sean Nixon and Tim Edwards have studied the context of the 1980s as a notable turning point for the growing public acceptance of the desirable male body in fashion and advertising through the popularity of men's style magazines (Stratton:1996, Mort:1996, Nixon:1996, Edwards:1997). Stratton, Nixon, Mort and Edwards claim that it was the convergence of influences from feminism, gay rights movements and the need to target new consumer male audiences that led to developments in mainstream representation of the homoerotic male body in men's style magazines. As Stratton states,

What has happened in this expansion of consumer targeting at men is that the male body - like the female body before it - is now being overtly constructed as a site of lack. It is being described in advertising as an incomplete or inadequate body which can be improved by buying these new male-orientated consumer goods (Stratton:1996:185).

The idea that consumerism targeted heterosexual men and challenged the stability of macho heterosexual masculinities has been articulated by many writers. In the same vein as Stratton, Edwards claimed that the male body has been accepted as desirable through cultures of consumption and what he calls 'product fetishism' (Edwards:1997:54). The idea of 'product fetishism' can also be seen in the work of Sut



Jhally and Susan Bordo who have also discussed how consumer advertising uses sexual desire to target readers through notions of what they lack (Jhally:1995, Bordo:1999). I employ the consumer gaze in my own work on masculinities and representation in men's magazines through the example of advertising, and I question whether discourses of consumerism represent a justificatory framework for representing homoerotic male bodies to heterosexual readers. However, I also move beyond consumerism and 'product fetishism' in order to question the status of near naked male bodies (through the example of muscular torsos) in discourses of fitness and health. While such images might be read in terms of identification, they also project a fantasy ideal that searches the bodies of models for signs of superiority in spaces that appear both inside and outside of consumer advertising.

While new representations of masculinities in the 1980s challenged notions of hegemonic masculinity, they did not eradicate the status of women's bodies as objects of sexual desire, and as Edwards states, images of women were 'set up in defensive opposition to the endlessly homoerotic displays of men's fashion, style and accessories' (Edwards:1997:78). In the context of heterosexual men's magazines, women's bodies maintain heterosexual stability, often diverting the gaze from the male body, or at least providing a context of justification whereby women's bodies take on more obvious codes of sexual availability. There are many writers who have questioned the status of the male body as an image of erotic spectacle, and who have claimed that the male

body offsets the framing of desire in the image as a result of its cultural associations with strength and power. For example, Anthony Easthope stated that,

This brings up the question of how it [the male body] is to be observed. It is not to be looked at with the eye of desire. This is precisely the look the masculine body positively denies as though it were saying, 'whatever else, *not* that' [...] Finally, one other thing that completes the idea of invincibility. Not only is the masculine body invariable portrayed erect but it seems to be able to inflate itself (Easthope:1990:54).

Easthope claimed that cultural frameworks deny objectification of the male body, and that the male physique was implicitly constructed as 'active' in visual representation, denying it the status of object. This viewpoint is relevant to the context of men's lifestyle magazines, and while I discuss images of homoerotic male bodies, it must simultaneously be remembered that women are the primary objects of sexual desire in both *FHM* and *Men's Health*, and serve to frame these magazines as heterosexual for heterosexual readers. However, the male body is also an object of desire in *Men's Health* and figure of self-deprecation/repulsion in *FHM*, and I intend to focus upon the ways in which the male body incites a variety of gazes that reflect contemporary shifts in notions of heterosexual masculinity.

There has been a proliferation of studies on men's lifestyle magazines with writers such as Bethan Benwell, Federico Boni, Aran Stibbe and collaborated work by Peter Jackson, Nick Stevenson and Kate Brooks offering discursive accounts of both *FHM* and *Men's Health* since the start of the new millennium (Benwell:2004, Stibbe:2004, Boni:2002, Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks:2001). The study of men's magazines has shifted to account for the discursive production of masculinities, and has analysed the



‘pleasures’ and ‘ambivalence’ of men’s magazines as well as the context of misogyny and the objectification of women (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks:2001:157). In their essay on *The Politics of Men’s Lifestyle Magazines*, Stevenson, Jackson and Brooks noted how through irony and the positioning of readers as ‘mates’ men’s magazine produced a ‘mediated intimacy’ (Stevenson, Jackson and Brooks:2000). Stevenson, Jackson and Brooks also stated that in *FHM* and *Men’s Health* ‘advertising material does not appear as an abrupt break from editorial content in the magazines but as a continuum’ (Stevenson, Jackson and Brooks:2001:369). Similarly, Benwell’s work on ironic discourses and language play has outlined how masculinities have been creative and elusive in men’s magazines such as *FHM*, using irony in ways that render masculinity both unstable and slippery (Benwell:2004:7). In Chapter 7 I question the status of irony in *FHM* and whether we can take irony at face value in the construction of evasive masculinities, or whether irony is merely a form of prurient humour that undermines the true potential of the ‘double-voiced’ term. I also question whether advertising does appear as a flow with the two magazines under study, or whether it represents a break from the surrounding cultural framework. While there are many advertisements that suit the respective environments of *FHM* and *Men’s Health* (in terms of the use of sex or fitness) there is also a large amount of crossover in the ways that the same advertising companies target both (very different) magazine titles. For example, in *FHM* there are advertisements for weight gain supplements, cosmetic surgery and homoerotic male bodies, all of which appear as a disruptive break from lad culture. In Chapter 6 I focus upon the latter set of advertisements in the production of homoerotic bodies as aspects of both *FHM* and *Men’s Health*, and I examine the

tensions created by these images in terms of the male gaze. I also extend the parameters of current research by introducing conceptions of the grotesque and internet cultures as sites that are relevant to the analysis of men's magazines in the new millennium.

## Racialising Whiteness

Academic research on the area of black masculinities and representation of the black male body is very large, and in feminism and men's studies tensions exist about where black men can be theorised in relation to patriarchy and hegemonic masculinities (for examples of work that represents a critical overview of black bodies and representation see Mercer and Julien:1988, hooks:1992, Gaines:1992 and Hall:1997b). The historical oppression of black men, the prevailing stereotypes that surround black muscular male bodies (including myths on the penis and hypersexuality), and also the relationship of black men to black and white women alike have caused many tensions in feminism, media and cultural studies. In *Race, Sexual Politics and Masculinity*, Mercer and Julien unpacked racist stereotypes of black men as violent and hypersexual, linking such concepts with the colonial fantasy of the 'super sexual stud' (Mercer and Julien:1988:133). Highlighting the cross-cutting contradictions of such images, Mercer and Julien examined how such stereotypes worked upon white fears to reinforce the oppression of black men. However, there was a corresponding irony in Mercer and Julien's analysis with some black men refusing to reject macho stereotypes in an effort to recuperate power, and as a response to violence. As Mercer and Julien stated,



Classical racism involved a logic of dehumanisation in which African peoples were defined as having bodies but not minds; in this way the super-exploitation of the black body as a muscle-machine could be justified [...] But on the other hand there are concrete advantages to be gained from appearing to play up to such general expectations (Mercer and Julien:1988:137).

In Chapter 6 I examine how white men have started to become represented in ways that have traditionally been associated with black bodies through reference to the athletic muscular male body and hypersexuality. While black men continue to face oppression both in society and in media cultures, it is interesting to read how white men have started to reclaim the body as a site that both embodies masculine power and that also places them as objects of scrutiny.

While it is necessary to acknowledge the tensions and political implications that black masculinities introduce in cultural work on representation, I intend to work with the concept of whiteness and to deconstruct how whiteness is normalised in men's lifestyle magazines. Although there are magazines that are targeted explicitly to black audiences in the UK (such as *Untold*, *Drum* or *Pride*) there are no specifically identified white men's magazines, yet most mainstream magazine titles on supermarket shelves hold an implicit white bias. Whiteness is taken for granted in British media culture, and is widely perceived as a cultural norm. Academics have increasingly adopted a critical stance on whiteness during the 1990s, with writers such as Richard Dyer, Ruth Frankenberg, Cecily Jones and Caroline Knowles questioning the status of the white subject as a racialised category (Frankenberg:1993, Dyer:1997, Jones:2003, Knowles:2003). In his introduction to *White*, Dyer stated that, 'as long as race is

something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people' (Dyer:1997:1). Feminists such as Cecily Jones have outlined how for decades black feminists had expressed the need to analyse race from the perspective of whiteness, and stated that, 'the tendency of white scholars to ignore whiteness as a racialised identity has reinforced prevalent assumptions of white identity as 'unraced' so that the association of whiteness with race identity has eluded theoretical analysis' (Jones:2003:196). This thesis self-consciously represents itself as a white project, and locates white heterosexual masculinities as the defining norm of men's lifestyle magazines such as *FHM* and *Men's Health*.

Moving onto the subject of white masculinities, and how conceptions of whiteness affect representations of the male body, Dyer interestingly pointed out how white men have avoided displaying their bodies in popular culture, since not only have clothes traditionally been 'bearers of prestige', but the body has also been regarded as a site of physical representation that has been associated with working class masculinities (Dyer:1997:146-7). In deconstructing the white male muscular body in bodybuilding, Dyer analysed the links between whiteness, classical bodies, colonial prestige and notions of ideal human development. Dyer stated that 'the built body presents itself as not typical but as ideal. It suggests our vague notions of the Greek gods and the *Urbarmensch*' (Dyer:1997:151-2). Indeed we can see this trend in magazines such as *Physical Culture* and the body of Charles Atlas as 'The World's Most Perfectly



Developed Man' outlined earlier in Chapter 1 (*SandowMuseum.com*, 'Charles Atlas', accessed 04.03.04). The idea that bodybuilders' bodies and white muscular male bodies are built upon colonialist conceptions of superiority is interesting, and raises questions on the status of the white muscular male body evident in magazines such as *Men's Health*. There is also the added irony of white masculinities being portrayed through the body in ways reminiscent of black male stereotypes of the muscular body, sexual virility and physical power. In magazines such as *Men's Health*, the muscular male body is constructed as a pursuit of middle class leisure, and it is therefore interesting to see the shift in power in representations of the muscular male body from working class and black bodies to white, middle class bodies. In Chapter 6 I question how white men have reclaimed the body in ways that have traditionally been associated with women (beauty) and with black men (physical muscularity and hypersexuality). What is important to signal here is the recognition of whiteness as an unspoken norm, and how whiteness pervades men's magazines and mediated constructions of masculinity.

## **Men, Muscles and Bodybuilding**

Before moving on to a discussion of literatures on the grotesque I will briefly turn to the subject of bodybuilding and the muscular male body that is produced ambiguously through notions of the 'perfectible' body and physical power. An overview of the literature on bodybuilding sits uncomfortably in the contexts of the desirable male body and also with the discussion of the grotesque. As I will argue in Chapter 6, this is a

result of the anxieties apparent in bodybuilding and the way that bodybuilder bodies sit ambiguously on the edge of the 'classical' and the 'grotesque'. Writers such as Kenneth Dutton and Richard Dyer have discussed the concept of the perfectible male body, and the influence that images of muscular male bodies have had upon conceptions of masculinities since classical antiquity (Dutton:1995, Dyer:1997). In his work on *The Perfectible Body*, Dutton used the examples of art, sculpture and bodybuilding to outline how idealised male bodies in western societies have traditionally conveyed tightness and symmetry of form, akin to images of the classical body (Dutton:1995:344). In *White*, Richard Dyer also examined the white male influence on bodybuilding, with classical bodies, 'Californianism' (lifestyles associated with health and energy) and colonialist adventure films providing three examples where white masculinities can be traced upon popular images of bodybuilding as a white masculine practice. The associations between whiteness, muscularity and power are interesting, and in Chapter 6 I discuss how bodybuilders occupy these positions in relation to theories on the grotesque. While the aim of bodybuilding is to achieve lean, toned and symmetrical bodies, the bodies of professional bodybuilders can be seen to run into excess through muscle and bulk, achieved through hyper-masculine performances that convey power through displays of muscularity and strength. In bodybuilding, the boundaries between the idealised and the grotesque are ambiguous. This is not only apparent in the contradictions that exist between what is perceived as classical (symmetrical) and grotesque (excessive), but also through practices and the ways that bodybuilding, especially professional competitive bodybuilding, involves detailed attention to grooming and displays of vanity.



In his essay, *What's Behind the Mask? Bodybuilding and Masculinity*, Thomas Johansson suggested that the regimes and practices involved in bodybuilding feminised the male body. In his discussion of male bodybuilders, Johansson stated, 'on the one hand, they represent hyper-masculinity, but on the other, their desire to display their bodies in public, becoming objects of the gaze of the Other, signifies a feminization of the male body' (Johansson:2003:93). Similar to Johansson, Tony Jefferson also recognised bodybuilding as a feminized practice when placed in comparison to boxing heroes, and stated that,

This exploration of hardness through both its mental and physical connotations of toughness had reconnected us, via the example of boxing and some of its legendary figures, to our starting point: the idea that strength in the service of displayed beauty (the bodybuilder's muscles) is suspect because latently feminine; whereas beauty in the service of strength or courage (the boxing of Ali or Sugar Ray) is, by contrast, solidly masculine (Jefferson:1998:84).

While practices such as tanning (for white bodybuilders), oiling and shaving the body so that it is bronzed, shiny and hair free could be read as feminizing practices, they are built upon the display of masculinity that show the body as powerful and are used in order to heighten the visibility of muscular definition. Writers such as Alan Klein and Harrison Pope, Katherine Phillips and Roberto Olivardia have highlighted the obsession with muscular bulk in bodybuilding and the associated use of steroids in pumping the body beyond what is naturally possible (Klein:1993, Pope, Phillips and Olivardia:2000). Muscle and power are at the forefront of professional bodybuilding, and it is an image that builds upon the male physique. Even competitive women bodybuilders can be seen to become more 'masculine' in their physical appearance as a result of excess muscle and physical changes such as the hardening of breasts. I will

discuss the ambiguities of bodybuilding in Chapter 6, and through bodybuilder bodies, I will argue the case for new conceptions of the male grotesque.

## Conclusion

The bodies of literature drawn upon in this chapter are extremely large, and a completely thorough, comprehensive analysis would be difficult to fit into any thesis. I have therefore signalled key thinkers, debates and thematic issues that raise questions for my own work on the construction of white heterosexual masculinities and the desirable male body. I have provided an overview of debates on the gaze, representation, advertising and magazine cultures in order to gain an interdisciplinary overview of the influences upon my own work on men's magazine cultures. Questions have been raised that relate to shifts in cultural and media constructions of masculinity and the male body, and in Chapter 6 I discuss how conceptions of the idealized body are produced in ways that mark changes in perceptions of the idealized male body for white heterosexual men. I also use online dialogues from readers of *menshealth.co.uk* to open out areas of debate on the construction of idealized male bodies.

Alongside issues of the gaze and representation, I have also discussed the concept of whiteness and the need to identify white bodies as racially positioned. White men today have started to reclaim the body as a site of empowerment in ways that hold mysterious parallels with traditional stereotypes on black masculinities. In Chapter 6 I



examine how the athlete, as an idealized embodiment of white masculinity in *Men's Health*, has taken on white characteristics, and how shifts in white masculinity have subjected men to forms of scrutiny in ways that relate to the objectification of both women's and black bodies.

Finally, I have outlined bodybuilding as a site for the production of the muscular male body that stands ambiguously on the terrain of the idealized and the grotesque. In Chapter 7 I will outline how bodybuilders (as excessive images of the Herculean ideal) stand as monstrous in *Men's Health* and comical in *FHM*, as overproduced bodies that display visible excess and perform hypermasculinity. At this point it is necessary to move from issues surrounding representations of 'idealized' bodies and instead move to consideration of the grotesque body. The production of grotesque bodies has been overlooked in magazine cultures, and in men's magazines the grotesque is a notable element in the production of white heterosexual masculinities and the bodies of 'Others'. In this thesis the grotesque acts as a counterpart to the production of idealized bodies, and so I will now turn to a detailed consideration of concepts of the abject and the grotesque as they relate to my work in Chapter 7.

# Chapter 3

## Theorising the Grotesque

I would now like to move from the sublime, idealized body to grotesque and abject bodies in order to add a further aspect of the conceptual frame that will be drawn upon in my three analytical chapters. In the context of men's lifestyle magazines, idealized, worked-on male bodies are constructed as normative, yet the grotesque is also apparent, both as a latent undercurrent (in *Men's Health*) and as a more obvious and active force (as with *FHM*). In *FHM*, the grotesque body is presented as a central element in the production of lad culture, and can be seen to defy its abjection by an upfront flaunting, and even celebration, of its degradation and its distance from the normative body. However, even the idealized, disciplined bodies of *Men's Health* may be read in terms of abjection, as the body work that is required to obtain such ideals suggests an anxiety to ward off the threat of abjection and the grotesque. Furthermore the disciplined bodies in *Men's Health* are prone to over-identification with muscular ideals and notions of hypermasculinity, and the lapse into the grotesque may occur as a consequence of doing too much as well as too little. Behind the well-honed bodies that make it onto the cover of *Men's Health*, there is the spectre of the excessively built body with its grotesque musculature and 'feminised' features. These ideas will be the subject of Chapters 6 and 7 and the analysis of grotesque bodies and performances as they appear in *FHM* and *Men's Health*. Photographs of male grotesque bodies represent new and interesting areas for debate, both for the study of masculinity and also in extending the parameters of the grotesque beyond the 'female grotesque'. In this chapter I will now turn to examine key themes in theories of the grotesque, abjection and



horror in order to provide a conceptual framework that will be drawn upon in my later analysis of the grotesque in men's magazines, and also to carve out a space for new analyses of the male grotesque.

## **Mikhail Bakhtin, Carnival and the Grotesque**

### Bakhtin's Analysis of Francois Rabelais and the Carnivalesque

Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the grotesque and carnival in *Rabelais and His World* (hereafter cited as *Rabelais*) has been important in helping me to understand how the grotesque offers the potential for transgression, resistance and regeneration.

In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin used the model of medieval carnivals and the novels of Francois Rabelais to highlight the pleasure and disruption that was located in the grotesque of the Middle Ages. According to Bakhtin, the novels of Rabelais (that reminisced about European medieval carnival) depicted spaces that encouraged the celebration of 'low' culture (which can be read as being synonymous with peasants and folk lore), laughter and the material body. Bakhtin stated that in carnival, 'verbal etiquette and discipline are relaxed, and indecent words and expression may be used [...] images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation and sexual life play a predominant role' (Bakhtin:1984:16-18). The grotesque body is counterpoised to 'classic aesthetics', and Bakhtin stated that 'copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration and dismemberment' constituted typical examples of the unfinished, grotesque body (Bakhtin:1984:25). Furthermore, the language of the marketplace was seen to characterise the grotesque, and Bakhtin linked billingsgate speech genres, hyperbole and parody to the cultural expression

and articulation of the grotesque. Bakhtin stated that ‘the marketplace was the centre of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology, it always remained ‘with the people’’ (Bakhtin:1984:154). In Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 I examine how men’s magazines employ grotesque bodies and billingsgate speech genres, and I evaluate their significance to the construction of heterosexual masculinities. I also question the conceptual split that exists between the classical body and the grotesque body, elaborating upon the ambiguous positioning of bodybuilders, as well as pointing to further areas for investigation into technologies of the grotesque and the work of performance artists such as Orlan.

### Positive and Negative Humour

In his work on the grotesque, Bakhtin distinguished between positive, regenerative humour and negative forms of humour, and the ways that billingsgate speech genres had become appropriated outside of the medieval context in ways that destroyed regenerative and birth-giving properties. Bakhtin stated that,

If the positive and negative poles of becoming (death-birth) are torn apart and opposed to each other in various diffuse images, they lose their direct relation to the whole and are deprived of their ambivalence. They retain the merely negative aspect, and that which they represent (defecation, urination) acquires a trivial meaning, our own contemporary meaning of these words. The images, or more correctly speaking the verbal expressions, continue to live in popular colloquialisms but with a radically transformed aspect. True, they still preserve a distant echo of old philosophy, a faint memory of billingsgate liberties. Only thus can their vitality and persistence be explained (Bakhtin:1984:150).

Marketplace speech genres are particularly relevant to a reading of *FHM*, where irony, hyperbole, parody and jokes form a major aspect of cultural dialogues.

However, what needs to be analysed here is whether the apparent irony in *FHM*



can be compared with marketplace speech genres, or whether irony renders *FHM* as negative, serving to objectify and highlight the status of outsiders as ‘Others’. Therefore, alongside my analysis of the grotesque body, I question whether irony can be read as regenerative, or whether it is necessarily negative and a prurient form of humour in the context of *FHM* as a magazine that is built around hyperbolic and billingsgate speech genres. I also intend to address whether grotesque bodies and marketplace speech genres become appropriated by consumer culture, excessive consumption, hedonism and the pursuit of pleasure.

### The Context of Carnival

In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin was aware of the temporary nature of carnival, and its contextual place as a specific point in time. Bakhtin stated that,

Thus carnival is the people’s second life, organised on the basis of laughter. It is festive life [...] On the other hand, the official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastical, feudal or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it (Bakhtin:1984:8-9).

Carnival was not seen to have influenced or incited structural change, but rather offered a state of temporary suspension from authority, a ‘second life’ that Bakhtin subsequently interpreted as a model for resistance and transgression. Through the model of medieval carnival Bakhtin observed the ways that ‘low’ cultures celebrated the material body, created ambivalence and juxtaposed articulations of laughter and profanation. Nevertheless, Bakhtin did provide space to view the carnivalesque outside of the Middle Ages, so that every historical period can be seen to have its own marketplace and carnival (Bakhtin:1984:474). Indeed, it is my contention that there are aspects of the carnivalesque which remain relevant to a reading of modern

media cultures that demonstrate a preoccupation with what might be termed cruel realism, (albeit in a diluted form from Bakhtin's original thesis of resistance and subversion). The celebration of 'low' cultural forms and billingsgate speech genres can be seen not only in the culture of *FHM*, but also in television shows such as *Jackass*, *Dirty Sanchez*, and *Johnny Vegas 18 Stone of Idiot*.<sup>1</sup> Each of these television programmes work with the concept of cruel realism insofar as they use pain and humiliation as sources of humour, indulging audiences in the abject. Furthermore, in such shows, masculinity is tested through degradation, daring, and the ability to take insults. Bakhtin's work on the grotesque is relevant to an analysis of the rise in cruel realism, and I will examine how *FHM* adopts the grotesque as a pivotal aspect of the construction of excessive and prurient forms of heterosexual masculinity.

### Spectacle, the Grotesque, and Positioning the Lad

In his analysis of the grotesque, Bakhtin was clear to distinguish between the grotesque and spectacle, with the latter being perceived as a non-participatory, negative form of humour. As Mary Russo states,

For Bakhtin, spectacle was the antithesis of the carnivalesque. Spectacle assumed a partitioning of space and a creation of discrete sidelines. It broke down the reciprocal roles played by performers and spectators in carnival, as actors became passive spectators or contemplatives involved in increasingly interiorized melodramas (Russo:1994:38).

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<sup>1</sup> *Jackass* was a television programme (and later a film) that concerned the extreme exploits of a group of American men as they conducted tests of torture and pranks for public entertainment. *Dirty Sanchez* followed in this tradition as a British version of the cruelty realist genre. Both shows have been aired by MTV. *Johnny Vegas 18 Stone of Idiot* was a Channel 4 television series hosted by the beer drinking, overweight and arguably grotesque northern English comic Johnny Vegas.



The representation of grotesque bodies as outsiders and freaks make it important not to simply reproduce Bakhtin's work on the grotesque and carnival onto a reading of *FHM*. For Bakhtin, the carnival was a space for participation, and the carnivalesque typifies an ambivalent and transgressive climate. Although the lad in *FHM* does participate in grotesque performance, he does so on unequal terms that render him as simultaneously degraded and brave. While the lad freely engages with cursing, insulting and mocking forms of language, his relationship to the grotesque body is complex, and fluctuates from objectification of the grotesque as 'Other', to forms of degrading behaviour that can itself be seen to function as grotesque. The influence of Bakhtin's work on the grotesque is important to my analysis, however I use it selectively as a conceptual framework to examine the implications of the grotesque as it is taken up by modern media cultures, and to question if the grotesque appropriates concepts of difference for entertainment or whether it is employed to subvert cultural and moral codes. Bakhtin's work in *Rabelais* can be read as idealistic, yet he provides a corporeal theory of resistance and opens up a critical space to question the foundations of western aesthetics on the classical body.

The overarching influences of consumer capitalism and the objectification of 'Others' in men's magazines prevent the full capacity for transgression. The shift from men's lifestyle magazines to the internet has also thrown grotesque display into the foreground as a defining aspect of *FHM* culture. *FHM.com* is a visual website that revels in grotesque display, and the relatively small advertising space results in

the invisibility of idealized male bodies as a point of contrast (to the grotesque) and as a source of identification/consumer desire (for male readers). In the context of *FHM* and *FHM.com*, the lad is constructed as a sophisticated reader of the grotesque, and is also implicated in its construction (for example, through excessive drinking, debauchery, mocking and laughter at debase humour). However, the lad is also positioned as a powerful, omniscient spectator. Through the objectification of 'Others', *FHM* arguably upholds hierarchical structures that place the lad in a position of power, with the bodies of 'Others' framed and controlled by magazine producers who identify with lad culture. For example, representations of freak show in features such as 'Dr. Freak's Casebook' on *FHM.com* attest to the ways that the lad is positioned as the observer of 'Others' in ways that control and objectify grotesque bodies as spectacle, using the generic conventions of the circus freak show.

Moving on from Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque, I will now examine Julia Kristeva's work on abjection and horror in order to theorise audience relationships to images of horror that threaten the boundaries between the self and the 'Other'. My reading of Kristeva is limited to her work on abjection, and does not encompass her wider essays on linguistics, semiotics or literature. I have read Kristeva's work on horror and abjection in order to elaborate upon some of the more extreme forms of the grotesque that directly threaten identity. In this thesis, psychoanalysis is used in a selective way so as to theorise the positioning of audiences in the



context of representation, and also to account for the desiring and curious gazes of audiences in the production of idealized images.

## Julia Kristeva on Horror and Abjection

### The Powers of Horror

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva outlined the dual purpose of abjection, and how images that repulse and horrify can simultaneously afford pleasure, and stated that ‘it follows that jouissance alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it. Violently and painfully’ (Kristeva:1982:9). The claim that abjection offers pleasure (jouissance) can be seen through the popularity of the grotesque in lad’s magazines such as *FHM*, where horrific images and devastating stories of death are framed by humour, curiosity and fascination. While it is difficult to speak of the positioning of spectators and emotional responses in text-based analysis, I use semiology combined with a selective use of psychoanalysis to help understand constructions of the gaze and how spectator subjects figure in the process of representation. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva suggested that images and narratives that inspire horror, repulsion and disgust represent forces that directly threaten material life and which are necessarily pushed to the borders of consciousness. In abjection, the grotesque treads on the edges of identity, desire and disgust, and regulates our actions. Kristeva states that,

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death -a flat encephalograph, for instance- I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I thrust aside in order to live. [...] My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border (Kristeva:1982:3).

Therefore, according to Kristeva's notion of abjection, photographs of wounds, dismemberment and decay do not simply represent images that signify death in and of themselves, but rather shows us what we avoid and dispose of in order to live. Such states of being exist at the border of our identity and threaten the mortal self, but they must also be confronted in order to reinstate psychic stability.

### Repressing the Abject

Using literature as one method for confronting the abject, Kristeva claimed that narratives that communicate abjection also provided space for catharsis and resurrection (Kristeva:1982:26). Furthermore, as John Lechte states, 'through a refusal to confront the abject, therefore, a fundamental aspect of individual and social life remains in oblivion, and our understanding and capacity to cope are thereby greatly diminished (Lechte:1990:158). This aspect of the abject is interesting when taking into consideration the role of the grotesque in *Men's Health*, a magazine that potentially denies the display of the grotesque and abjection, replacing these physical states with disciplined, muscular bodies and sanitised articles on the prevention of disease, morbidity and mortality. What is interesting in *Men's Health* is the degree to which vanity is pushed to the forefront of the cultural framework, while at the same time discourses of exercise, fear and prevention regulate the possibility of the grotesque and restrict active dialogue on



abjection. In Chapter 6 I examine some of the issues raised by men who do not live up to idealized standards of the male body with respect to body obsession, and in Chapter 7 I question whether over-conformity to discipline, and a refusal to confront the abject, are both implicated in discourses of insecurity or self-loathing. In Chapter 7 I also question how the display of abject forces reflect upon the construction of the lad in *FHM*, and I analyse whether the representation of abject images really do confront maternal forces, or whether the maternal is displaced by notions of hypermasculinity.

## **A Comparative Overview of Bakhtin and Kristeva**

### The Carnavalesque and Horror

Kristeva's work on horror and abjection was heavily influenced by Bakhtin's writings on dialogism, carnival and the grotesque, and there are both conceptual overlaps and differences between the works of these two authors. While Bakhtin and Kristeva both acknowledge the grotesque's debt to nature and the regenerative cycle of death/rebirth, the carnivalesque and the abject hold slightly different interpretations on the function of the grotesque. In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin highlighted practices such as excessive eating, the public display of bodily functions or billingsgate speech genres as aspects of the grotesque body and performance. The grotesque body in Bakhtin's work could be rendered as abject in itself, it embodies the horror that Kristeva associates with the process of abjection and publicly displays visual signs of degradation. Bakhtin's carnivalesque is participatory, inclusive and communal, with the grotesque body functioning as a model for transgression from authority and official discourses. In *Rabelais*, the grotesque

body gives birth to new forms of language that promote ambivalence and diversity. Bakhtin claimed that hierarchical social structures repressed the potential of the grotesque, so that grotesque bodies stood as sites for resistance and disruption of the prevailing social, cultural and moral codes. In Kristeva's work, abjection is a psychic reaction from being positioned in relation to horror, with such images representing a threat to identity and a space to reflect upon one's boundaries and the positioning of the embodied self. Writing on abjection and the work of Kristeva, Elizabeth Grosz stated, 'abjection is the expression of both a division (between the subject and its body) and a merging (of self and Other, the social)' (Grosz:1990:92). Therefore abjection represents a space for merger, yet this potential is not set out in the same celebratory and communal terms of Bakhtin's carnivalesque. Whereas Bakhtin's grotesque embodies an idealized positioning, Kristeva's process of abjection highlights how as humans we resist forces that are seen to threaten, but which actually hold unexplored openings. Both the carnivalesque and the abject are about repositioning the self, and the potential for rebirth and regeneration. While Bakhtin analyses the grotesque as a site of communal celebration and struggle against hegemonic cultures, Kristeva examines the psychological consequences of abject repression, and extrapolates the potential of the abject (the 'One Master Signifier') to demystify power relations (Kristeva:1982:209).

### Bakhtin and Kristeva on the Maternal Body

Before moving onto an analysis of the monstrous feminine, the female grotesque and feminism, I will first outline how both Bakhtin and Kristeva viewed the role of



the maternal in their respective theories of the grotesque and abjection. Both Bakhtin and Kristeva have been extremely influential in later work conducted on the 'female grotesque', most notably the work of Barbara Creed and Mary Russo who have separately argued the potential of the female grotesque to envisage an embodied feminist politics (I discuss the work of Creed and Russo in detail below).

In Kristeva's work, abjection and jouissance are concepts that are linked to the maternal body. According to Kristeva, the abject is a psychological stage of development that pre-dates entrance to the symbolic, and which is linked to rejection of the maternal function, it is '*the 'object' of primal repression*'

(Kristeva:1982:12-13. Original emphasis). Furthermore, as John Lechte states,

Before the 'beginning' of the symbolic, there must have already been moves by the way of drives, towards expelling/rejecting the mother [...] The point is that the symbolic is not, of its own accord, strong enough to ensure separation; it depends on the mother becoming abjected (Lechte:1990:159).

As an ambivalent image of the 'desirable and terrifying' and the 'nourishing and murderous', the maternal body is marked as the foundation of the abject in psychoanalysis. Images of horror threaten to castrate the subject and position them as a point of identification with the 'Other', and Kristeva states that 'abjection then takes the place of the other, to the extent of affording him jouissance...'

(Kristeva:1982:54).

Bakhtin's grotesque similarly suggests that the maternal body represents a model for the grotesque, and he used the image of Kerch terracotta figurines that depicted laughing 'senile pregnant hags' to emphasise the ambivalence of 'pregnant death, a death that gives birth' (Bakhtin:1984:317). However, for Bakhtin the model for the

grotesque is embodied and inclusive, and rather than signifying a space for psychic development, the positioning of the maternal body in *Rabelais* is more clearly linked to the act of childbirth as a model for the cycle of birth-death-rebirth. In *Rabelais*, the maternal, pregnant body gives symbolic birth to forms of deviance that are linked to the material world, yet which are not gender specific. Bakhtin did not set out his theory of the grotesque as necessarily feminine, however pregnancy, delivery and childbirth were used as physical states that signified the regenerative properties of the grotesque as ‘a body in the act of becoming’ (Bakhtin:1984:317). In her theory of abjection, Kristeva also did not set out the maternal as feminine, but rather used it to symbolise a disembodied function of psychic processes. Elizabeth Grosz summarised that, ‘maternity is thus not the function of a *woman* (this is also Kristeva’s position regarding femininity): it is an organic, a social, a pre-signifying space-time: it is disembodied, a function and not a mode of the corporeal specific to women’ (Grosz:1990:97). Both Bakhtin and Kristeva provide space for the analysis of male bodies as grotesque. In Chapter 7 I question whether the maternal body is the main point of reference for the display of the grotesque, and I analyse whether there is a basis to view the grotesque male body in terms of excessive discipline and over conformity to notions of hypermasculinity.

In Chapter 7 I examine how the maternal frames the grotesque in the production of masculinities and homosocial spaces. I also analyse how the pain of abjection is positioned in the construction of masculinities. Reading the abject as a rejection of the maternal is interesting when placed in the context of *FHM*, and the ways that women’s bodies figure as a primary site of representation and sexual objectification.



Kristeva's work raises questions about whether the use of grotesque imagery in men's magazines is built upon a rejection of the maternal figure, and if so, then I will question how grotesque figures are primarily depicted as male bodies and placed in contrast to photographs of beautiful, young, women models who adorn most pages in *FHM*. I will also question whether these latter figures can also be read as grotesque in the context of *FHM* as a grotesque text, with women displayed and moulded to represent hypersexuality in ways that potentially render them as sexual freaks.

### Images of Horror and the Grotesque Body

As I have stated above, there are many images printed in *FHM* that can be categorised as horrific, and which can be seen to invoke abjection. In *FHM*, features such as 'Problems: Emergency Ward' provide space for readers to submit photographs that depict scenes of accidents and injuries as close-up images that show the disturbed boundaries between skin and the inner body. In *FHM*, there have also been instances where dismembered body parts have been displayed, and where disease, decay and death have eaten away at flesh. In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin allowed for the more sinister aspects of the grotesque and stated that,

Grotesque images may, of course, present other members, organs and parts of the body (especially dismembered parts), but they play a minor role in the drama [...] The grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs (Bakhtin:1984:318).

Furthermore, according to Bakhtin, the grotesque functions to overturn the closed, smooth body and instead presents growths, orifices and innards that encourage reflection and invoke the cycle of life-death-birth. Here, the grotesque disrupts authority and regenerates life and community, with the grotesque body producing

‘terror [that] is conquered by laughter’ (Bakhtin:1984:336). Following on from Bakhtin, and with Kristeva’s theory of abjection in mind, it is the more ‘extreme’ forms of grotesque representation that I turn to analyse, and in Chapter 7 I will explore how images of bloody wounds and corpses are relevant to heterosexual masculinities in men’s magazines.

## Horror, the ‘Monstrous Feminine’ and Masculinity

In her work on *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed deconstructed the ways in which women have been typically positioned as monstrous in the horror genre, and provided a feminist analysis of how women have been stereotyped as, for example, the archaic mother, monstrous wombs or as witches (Creed:1993).

Working with Kristeva’s work on horror and the maternal abject, Creed stated that ‘images of blood, vomit, pus, shit, etc..., are central to our culturally/socially constructed notions of the horrific. They signify a split between two orders; the maternal authority and the law of the father’ (Creed:1993:13). In *The Monstrous Feminine*, Creed noted the significance of the vagina as a horrific image in western culture, with the myth of vagina dentata and castration anxiety combining to form an aspect of the female grotesque that is based upon women’s excessive sexuality and fear of the castrating ‘Other’. Subverting Freud’s notion of the castration complex, Creed stated that, ‘like Count Dracula, the monstrous creature of *Alien* is constructed as the archaic mother but in my view the mother’s phallus-fetish covers over, not her lack – as Freud argued – but rather, her castrating *vagina dentata*’ (Creed:1993:22. Original emphasis). Creed also paid attention to the womb as an enveloping image of the grotesque, and claimed that the monstrous womb



counteracted Freud's castration complex. Creed stated that 'the womb is not the site of castration anxiety. Rather, the womb signifies 'fullness' or 'emptiness' but it is always its *own point of reference*' (Creed:1993:27. Original emphasis).

The vagina dentata and the monstrous womb are popular myths in the horror genre, and it is interesting to see how such conceptions of the sexually castrating woman are represented in men's magazines. While the enveloping, monstrous womb is absent from men's lifestyle magazines, images of the hypersexual vagina dentata can be seen in relation to the representation of women's bodies as visions of hypersexuality. In Chapter 7 I discuss how lads' magazines are sites that reject the maternal, using images of young, slim models counterpoised with athletically muscular men to construct notions of heterosexual masculinity. However, I simultaneously question whether the sexualised depiction of women in *FHM* renders them as sexual 'freaks'. While the female grotesque is a marginal figure of resistance for writers such as Barbara Creed and Mary Russo (whose work I discuss below), images of women as sexual objects pervade lads' magazines such as *FHM* and are positioned in ways that display hypersexual, exaggerated sexual characteristics that threaten castration. The representation of hypersexual women can be read as part of the wider grotesque framework of lads' magazines such as *FHM*, with models positioned as simultaneously desirable and threatening to constructions of heterosexual masculinity.

In discussing the role of Kane in the film *Alien*, Barbara Creed stated that, 'when male bodies become grotesque, they tend to take on characteristics associated with female bodies; in this instance man's body becomes grotesque because it is capable of being penetrated' (Creed:1993:19). However, in *FHM*, the vast majority of abject bodies are male, using images that can both be seen to feminise and masculinise the body in relation to the female grotesque (such as open wounds or diseased orifices) and notions of hypermasculinity (associated with closed scars, survival and heroism). Furthermore, the idea that the grotesque necessarily feminises the body runs counter to my work on bodybuilding as a form of hyper-masculine grotesque, and also the excessive practices of lad culture such as consumption of alcohol and the beer belly that are linked to masculine cultural practices in British society. As I discuss in Chapter 7, many of the grotesque images contained in men's magazines can be read in line with the female grotesque, yet there are wider elements to the grotesque male body that relate to heavily masculine aesthetics, practices and performances. Therefore in Chapter 7 I question whether the feminized view of the male body in images of horror is challenged by notions of hypermasculinity, where male bodies take on grotesque forms that are directly associated with masculinized views of the muscular male body and daring, excessive behaviours.

## **Masculinity and Horror**

In his essay *Masculinity and the Horror Film*, Peter Hutchings claimed that as a 'male' genre the horror film indulged viewers in masochism, and in the process feminised the spectator in fantasies of disempowerment and vulnerability.



Following Creed, who identified the monstrous feminine in horror as linked with psychoanalytic concepts of the maternal grotesque, Hutchings elaborated upon the feminised spectator position in horror. Hutchings stated that,

It follows from this that the male spectator experiences horror cinema as a series of pleasurable subjections, as multiple fantasies of disempowerment, then, as a subject of patriarchal social order that insistently identifies femininity with powerlessness, he must also feel it, consciously or otherwise, as a feminising experience (Hutchings:1993:91).

In the last chapter I outlined Mulvey's work on the male gaze and spectatorship, and how the spectator position in Hollywood cinema was masculinised. In

*Masculinity and the Horror Film*, Hutchings can be seen to subvert the male gaze through his claim that horror feminises male spectators, much in the same way as Steve Neale (working with Mulvey's conception of the male gaze) discussed the feminising of men as erotic spectacle on the cinema screen (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of Neale's work on the male gaze). On the subject of power and the gaze, Hutchings states that, 'it could be argued that male submission to disempowerment, that is a willing subjection made by someone who already has power, is merely a way of confirming possession of that power'

(Hutchings:1993:92). According to Hutchings, horror positions the male spectator as vulnerable, subjecting the self to masochistic desires in order to redefine the masculine self as powerful and in ultimate control. The idea that horror serves to feminise male spectators is interesting when taking into account horrific images in *FHM*, and in Chapter 7 I analyse the potential ways that men are feminised in images of horror and in abjection. However, and as I will later explore, while the genre of the horror film often serves to position viewers as vulnerable, it is important to remember that images of blood and wounds in *FHM* do not necessarily hold the same implications as the narrative framework of the film

medium. In *FHM* there are photographs that can be seen to display bravado as much as vulnerability, and such images are framed with ironic captions to incite humour, and ostensibly position the male reader as both fascinated by, and capable of enduring, abject images that threaten to undermine psychic stability.

## The Female Grotesque

In her work on the subject of the female grotesque, Russo claimed that women's bodies formed the most powerful configurations of the grotesque, and stated that,

The category of the female grotesque is crucial to identity formation for both men and women as a space of risk and abjection. What might be called 'male grotesques' are featured in this book, but I will argue their identities as such are produced through an association with the feminine as the body marked by difference (Russo:1994:13).

Working closely with Bakhtin's ideas on the grotesque and carnival, Russo explored the 'doubleness' and 'regenerativity' of the grotesque as a symbolic model for feminist resistance, and offered readings of the grotesque that focused upon both the material body and performance. In the same vein as Bakhtin, Russo distinguished between the closed, smooth body of classical aesthetics and the material body of the grotesque that is 'open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing' (Russo:1994:8). Russo was also clear in distinguishing between grotesque bodies and the representation of freaks, and stated that, 'produced historically in the same field of vision, freaks shared the same distancing, scrutiny, classification and exchange value as other colonial and domestic booty as the discourses of medicine, criminology, tourism, advertising and entertainment converged' (Russo:1994:79). The grotesque represents a corporeal theory of resistance and subversion, and in my analysis of men's magazines I question



whether the grotesque is taken up as a form of subversion to conceptions of hegemonic masculinity, or whether magazine producers appropriate the grotesque to shock and entertain audiences through ridicule, cruelty and freak show.

In *The Female Grotesque*, Russo claimed that the practice of grotesque performance provided a model for feminist resistance, with the subversive potential so powerful that,

the political implications of this heterogeneity are obvious: it sets carnival apart from the merely oppositional and reactive; carnival and the carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge and pleasure (Russo:1994:325).

Taking the example of early twentieth century stuntwoman Amelia Earhart, Russo outlined how Earhart's experiences of flying marked her as deviant, abnormal and 'boyish'. It is the experience of stunting that Russo finds intriguing in relation to 'grotesque performances' and 'the grotesque as female bodily performance' (Russo:1994:21-22). Part of Russo's reasoning in using Earhart to explore the possibilities of the grotesque was aimed at revising Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque as a 'static', 'universalistic' and 'symbolically low' concept for women (Russo:1994:29). Russo states that 'the emphasis on aeriality (rather than loftiness) is meant to introduce a principle of turbulence into the configuration female/grotesque' (Russo:1994:29). And while the slim, pretty figure of Amelia Earhart is not what is typically seen as grotesque in terms of physical images that signify excess, the historical context and activity of Earhart's stunting activities position her as an outsider and an ambivalent figure that Russo subsequently interprets as grotesque performance.

The ways that grotesque performance, philobatism and mobility disrupt the male gaze is important to Russo's analysis of the female grotesque as a model for feminist resistance. Mobility implies strength and power, and the 'defiance of gravity' that we see in stuntwomen and aerial artists resists objectification. Using Michael Balint's notion of philobatism as feelings and sensations organised by thrill, danger and pleasure, Russo explores the positioning of deviant women artists in gender relations and feminist politics. Russo asks the question 'can one locate the philobatic imagination within the confines of the grotesque?' (Russo:1994:50). And the way that Russo expands the grotesque into a reading of bodily performance and deviant, transgressive activities can be seen to imply just that. The notion of philobatism is interesting and can be seen to provide a framework for reading the daring and thrill involved in activities of the grotesque such as extreme sports or activities that involve danger that are apparent in men's magazines. Although the feminist potential is lost in the context of men's magazines, philobatism allows us to understand the thrill and excitement located in daring behaviours as part of grotesque performance. Furthermore, it is ironically appropriate for the study of masculinities that are developed in terms of excess (for example, masculinity is often associated with excessive physical activities, daring and bravado), and in Chapter 7 I discuss how heterosexual masculinities adopt excessive and daring behaviour through the framework of the grotesque. However, the hedonism that is evident in lad culture holds different implications to philobatism. While hedonism is dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure and the consumptions of 'Others', philobatism involves the love of risk taking behaviour as part of community performance. The distinctions made between grotesque bodies and grotesque performances are interesting, and important to my own work with respect to the



construction of the lad in *FHM*, and to the growing culture of cruel realism in western media.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined central themes that I will draw upon in my analysis of the grotesque in men's magazines in Chapter 7. Working primarily with Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque and the grotesque body I examine the subversive potential of the grotesque in defying the boundaries of normative constructions of hegemonic masculinity. Jane Arthurs has described the grotesque as the transformation of disgust into humour, and this notion largely corresponds with my analysis of the grotesque in *FHM* (Arthurs:1999:137). In *FHM*, humour is used to frame images of the grotesque, and billingsgate speech genres form the basis for what the mass media has termed lad culture. In *FHM*, the grotesque is central to the visual framework of the magazine, and sets up a masculine culture that is not scared to look at bodies that celebrate materiality or which inspire repulsion. With respect to Kristeva's theory on abjection, I analyse how images of horror are framed in the context of *FHM*, and I examine how such images function to position the heterosexual male subject.

In *Men's Health* the grotesque is largely hidden and repressed, and readers are instead faced with discourses of discipline that are designed to counter the grotesque body. Yet, as I will argue in Chapter 7, through the example of

bodybuilding we can see a breakdown between the classical Herculean body and the grotesque body that pushes and bulges outwards from the smooth contours of the skin. Whereas Bakhtin's grotesque is presented as breaking moral codes and boundaries, and engaging in excessive eating, drinking and merriment, the bodybuilder arguably becomes grotesque through strict regimes of discipline. The grotesque runs latent in *Men's Health*, and bearing in mind Kristeva's work on abjection, I discuss the implications of the repression of the grotesque in the disciplined culture of *Men's Health*. The grotesque is evident in both of the magazines under study in this thesis, and I intend to analyse how the grotesque frames the male body and masculinities in the respective cultures of *FHM* and *Men's Health*.

In Chapter 7 I also discuss the 'types' of grotesques that appear in *FHM* and *Men's Health*, and their function in relation to how masculinities are produced. I argue that while grotesque representation can be traced back to the female body and the maternal function, there are also specific forms of the male grotesque that are based upon conceptions of hypermasculinity and excessive behaviours that are deemed to be culturally masculine (such as excessive consumption of beer and beer bellies). There is complexity in debates on the grotesque, and in Chapter 7 I re-examine the theories put forward by writers such as Barbara Creed and Mary Russo that the grotesque is intrinsically and quintessentially female.



In Chapter 2 I provided a literature review on the debates that surrounded spectatorship, the gaze and representation, and I established an overview of some of the central themes and conceptual tools that will be drawn upon in this thesis. I also raised questions on how cultural shifts in the representation of masculinities have created a variety of 'gazes'. While Mulvey's 'male gaze' remains relevant to a reading of heterosexual men's lifestyle magazines that position women as the primary objects of desire, there are a variety of 'gazes' used by media producers that reveal complexities in the construction of masculinity. The grotesque body also invites a gaze, and the use of male bodies as grotesque raises interesting questions with respect to the objectification of the male body. This is discussed further in Chapter 7. In this chapter I have discussed work that has been written on the grotesque, abjection and horror, and in Chapter 7 I will continue to outline a frame of analysis that locates the male body as grotesque through the maternal body and also through conceptions of hypermasculinity. However, I will now turn to a review of the literature that is relevant to my analysis of online communities and men's magazine websites in Chapter 8. The rise of the internet has encouraged a shift to the production of men's online magazine websites, and for the third and final part of my thesis I will observe how readers interact online in the contexts of *FHM.com* and *menshealth.co.uk*, and will question how reading relations are reconfigured in the presence of homosocial male communities.

# Chapter 4

## Computer Networks, Online Communities and Speech Genres

In this chapter I will move on from relevant debates surrounding theories of the grotesque to themes relating to my analysis of the online environment, and will consider the ways in which (dis)embodied gender identity work and gender community work are both forged through the homosocial spaces provided by men's online magazines. To clarify this argument, and to position my analysis ahead of Chapter 8, I will draw upon four key areas of debate and analytic resources: (i) critical feminist perspectives on gender identity work and the internet as a site of transgressive potential; (ii) work on the notion of community, online communities and personae as sites for social bonding and the expression of identity; (iii) feminist and related perspectives on consciousness raising as a site for communicating gender identity; and (iv), Bakhtin's work on dialogism and speech genres, in order to elaborate upon the ways that, in the online environment, gender identity work may be understood and simultaneously constituted as gender community work.

The growth of the world wide web (hereafter abbreviated as WWW) and the proliferation of websites since the 1980s and through to the new millennium have generated widespread academic theories on the opportunities opened up by internet technologies and interactive communities. Advances in technology and the internet



have renewed debates surrounding embodiment, space and identity. As Judith Squires has suggested, the relationships between humans and computer networks have become increasingly blurred and ‘... the boundaries between technology and nature are in the midst of a deep restructuring’ (Squires:2000:361). In Chapter 8 the online websites *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com* are read as environments that not only extend the magazine brand image of *Men’s Health* and *FHM* respectively, but which are used as sites for collective readership that also allow personae to engage in dialogic exchange and to confront issues that relate to theories of masculinity and the constitution of homosociality. The observation of online communities has provided me with access to male dialogues on the subject of masculinity, the male body and the positioning of ‘Others’. In this respect men’s magazine websites have provided both essential audience research to support my text-based analyses, and allow an empirical study of the actual use of the internet to engage with theoretical analyses of the internet’s potential.

In this chapter I will begin by focusing on theories of gender and technology, including how the image of technology as a male dominated space is evident in men’s online magazines. I then outline debates surrounding online personae and how choices of username reflect part of the online character and identity of personae, before moving onto theories surrounding virtual communities and the internet as a site of community formation. This section on ‘communities’ will focus on the construction of ‘virtual’ communities, and how factors such as anonymity generate new homosocial spaces; the

relationship between the WWW's transcendence of geographical locality and the invocation of imagined boundaries of community on message boards; and the similarities between feminist conscious raising groups and the message boards of *menshealth.co.uk*. The chapter will conclude with reference to Bakhtin's work on dialogism and speech genres, in order to elaborate upon the preceding work and outline the ways that, in the online environment, gender identity work may be understood and simultaneously constituted as gender community work.

## **Gender, Technology and Computer Networks**

In *Feminism Confronts Technology*, Judy Wajcman outlined how technologies have been appropriated by men, and highlighted ways that western cultures have created technology with visions of mastery and 'obsession with control' (Wajcman:1991:141). Wajcman claimed that women have traditionally had restricted access to technologies, been denied the status of experts, and been subjected to the power and control that technologies exert over everyday lives. However, as Merete Lie has suggested, many women 'do in fact work with technology, as users and also as inventors. The problem is that such activities on the part of women are made invisible' (Lie:1995:379).

Whether designed by men or women, the image of technology as a male dominated space is evident in men's online magazines. For example, in *FHM.com*, visual software technologies are incorporated into the website to enhance the visibility and the sexual objectification of women, with no corresponding images of the sexualised male body. The spaces offered by *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com* have been explicitly designed



for men, and involve the use of technology to reinforce white, heterosexual masculinities. In Chapter 8, I will therefore analyse the implications for the use of visual software technology in the relatively new spaces of men's online magazines, and question how such software is associated with the contextual constructions of masculinities.

In my research I have not become aware of any corresponding use of visual software that positions male bodies as a sexual objects for female readers.<sup>1</sup> Corresponding women's magazine websites such as *Glamourmagazine.co.uk* or *Handbag.com* focus on women's bodies and fashion, and do not employ visual soft-core pornographic repertoires in the same way as *FHM.com*. For example, *Glamoumagazine.co.uk* is divided into sections on 'daily gossip', 'fashion', 'beauty', 'health', 'celebs' 'games' and 'love'. In comparison, *FHM.com* uses the subjects of women, sex and the grotesque in features such as 'Girls on the Sofa', 'Ladies Confess' or 'Dr. Freak's Casebook'.

Throughout my research I have observed how the top selling British women's magazines have fewer and less developed websites than the equivalent British men's magazines. This could reinforce the viewpoint that the internet and computer technologies are still often perceived as male dominated domains, or it could simply point towards the lack of profitability in introducing comprehensive women's online

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest that women do not use the internet for pornography, as not only are pornographic sites for women widely available online, writers such as Marjorie Kibby and Brigid Costello have also discussed the use of CU-SeeMe and the way that 'CU-SeeMe allows women to look actively and speak powerfully to control the discourses of sexuality. It does enable a female erotic gaze' (Kibby and Costello:1999:4). CU-SeeMe is a software facility that allows participants to send photo images to one another and to engage in online chat.

magazines as part of an extended brand image for top-selling magazines such as *Marie Claire* or *Cosmopolitan*. However, I do not intend to engage with a comparative analysis of men's and women's online magazines. In this thesis, I examine the ways that *FHM.com* and *menshealth.co.uk* have diversified, question how online men's magazines employ visual technologies to frame women's bodies, and discuss how the use of such technology reflects upon the positioning of heterosexual male readers and conceptions of masculinity.

## Personae

### Online Deception

The capacity for online deception has been well documented both by academics and journalists who have discussed how the internet has provided space for online fraud and identity theft. Furthermore, interaction via online message boards and chat rooms hold a sinister edge, providing the opportunity for social deviants such as paedophiles to groom children for abusive relationships. Indeed, in 2003, MSN closed down its European message boards in order to prevent inappropriate relationships being built between children and potential paedophiles. Quoted by the BBC, MSN UK spokesperson Mark Whittingham stated that, 'we have seen cases where under-16s have been approached by people pretending to be same age, but who are grown adults trying to solicit young people for abusive contact' (*news.bbc.co.uk*, 'MSN Shuts Down It's Chatrooms', 24.09.03). One major problem with online research rests on the fact



that the participants under study are personae, and as such have a heightened capacity for deception in relation to their 'true' and 'real life' identities. As Judith Donath states,

Identity plays a key role in virtual communities [...] Yet in the disembodied world of the virtual community, identity is also ambiguous. Many of the basic cues about personality and social role we are accustomed to in the physical world are absent (Donath:1998:29).

The fact that many internet researchers do not come face-to-face with the people that they study (and often use methods such as participant or non-participant observation, and e-mail interviews) raises inevitable questions that relate to the validity of a subject's identity. Online deception is an inevitable grey area that cannot be fully uncovered and there is increased potential for lies with respect to identity in spaces that permit anonymity. As Michael Heim has suggested, in cyberspace,

Bodily contact becomes optional; you need never stand face-to-face with other members of the virtual community. You can live your own separate existence without ever physically meeting another person. Computers may at first liberate societies through increased communication [...] They have, however, another side, a dark side (Heim:1993:97).

The lack of physical contact in online interactions is often at the root of criticisms with online research, the conception of online communities and questions of deception and authenticity. *Menshealth.co.uk* is a community grounded in everyday experiences of men, and while deception and lies can occur online, the structure of the website encourages networking and friendships to be made between readers, providing space to remember consistencies in narrative and the construction of personae. The *menshealth.co.uk* message boards allow participants collectively to discuss topics that are based upon real life issues and scenarios. As an extension of a popular

heterosexual male magazine, *menshealth.co.uk* is structured to contain knowledge that is specific to masculinities and the male body. Therefore, while one can never be certain of the identity of online personae, regardless of factors such as usernames, photographs, and gender specific knowledge, those who visit *menshealth.co.uk* and participate on a regular basis have an investment in communicating and maintaining masculine cultures.

### Personae and Usernames

My analysis of online masculinities rests upon the construction of gender identities as personae, and observes relations between personae as forms of communication that are loaded with wider social implications. I intend to analyse how the construction of personae and online dialogues are marked by gender, race and sexuality, and the implications of social positioning for notions of hegemonic masculinity in men's online magazines. The use of online usernames is significant to the construction of personae, and research conducted by Margery Kibby and Brigid Costello discussed the importance of usernames to the production of phallic identities in sex chat rooms.

Kibby and Costello stated that,

Identity on the refs is primarily constructed and revealed through the names chosen by participants, and a significant number of men use names that establish their identities in terms of their penises: 8 ½, Hard 4U, Tool, Firehose. Computer mediated contact between individuals always leaves gaps in their experience of each other, and these gaps are filled by the images, desires, and emotions evoked by the on-line name. (Kibby and Costello:1999:361).

The gaps left by the lack of physical contact in computer mediated conversations are important to consider, and help us to understand the significance of the ways that



disembodied personae construct online identities through their choice use of usernames, as well as through writing styles and utterances beyond the linguistic (expressed online through punctuation or emoticons). Choices of username reflect part of the online character of personae, and are used by participants to construct a prominent aspect of their online identity. However, in an effort to protect online identity I have refrained from analysing usernames in *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com*. The choices made and the rationale for this decision will be explored in Chapter 5. The use of usernames in *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com* are diverse, and change according to online character and the subject of discussion. In general, readers of *menshealth.co.uk* present a more mature image of masculinity, and often choose usernames that reflect first names such as John, Dave or Andy. In Chapter 8 I will pay particular attention to the use of anonymous usernames as an interesting aspect of affective dialogues where anonymity frames speech and becomes a self-conscious process of dialogic exchange.

## Communities

### Constructing 'Virtual' Communities

I would now like to assess debates regarding the internet as a site of community formation and social movements. The idea that online computer-mediated conversations (CMC) can be regarded as 'real' communities has been criticised for the apparent lack of investment and obligation present in online contexts in comparison with wider social based community networks that involve face-to-face interaction. In

*Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, cultural critic Neil Postman suggested that computers promoted individualism and isolation, and consequently criticised the opportunities opened up for the expression of online communities (Postman:1992). As Nessim Watson has neatly summarized,

Postman fears that calling online collectivities ‘communities’ alters the meaning of the term and discards one of its most vital elements. For him, application of the metaphor to cyberspace discussion groups pollutes the concept and changes it so that the notion of common obligation is forgotten (Watson:1997:122).

Philosophers such as Michael Heim have also warned against the threat posed by online communities, and the potential for the breakdown of everyday interaction and relationships. In his analysis of the trajectories of cyberspace, Heim stated that,

Without directly meeting others physically, our ethics languishes. Face-to-face communication, the fleshly bond between people, supports a long term warmth and loyalty, a sense of obligation for which the computer mediated communities have not yet been tested (Heim:1993:76).

My own work on men’s magazine message boards utilizes the concept of community in the analysis of online interaction, and in Chapter 8 I question whether *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com* can be viewed as dialogic community spaces. From this, I then discuss the implications of online communities and how relationships and friendships are formed online between men. I also analyse the how the structuring of websites affects dialogic spaces, and whether the capacity for interactive dialogue is, in itself, a basis for constituting message boards as community spaces.

In his work on virtual communities, Nessim Watson claimed we cannot romanticize the idea of real life communities in a world where the concepts of community and



common obligation have become less significant (Watson:1997). The online environments of chat rooms and message boards have provided new spaces for social interaction, communication, and arguably, social investments in online communities. The emergence of the internet, interactive web spaces and CMC forced academics to review the concept of community. As Barry Wellman and Milena Guila state, 'social network analysts have had to educate traditional, place-orientated, community sociologists that communities can stretch well beyond the neighbourhood' (Wellman and Guila:1999:169). At the forefront of academic research on internet communities, Howard Rheingold has suggested that we think about online communities as 'virtual communities' using community as a metaphor to describe online interactions that simulate the real world. In his influential essay on *The Virtual Community* Rheingold related his own experiences of his involvement in one of the first internet based communities WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link. See Rheingold:2001). Howard Rheingold defined the virtual community as follows,

Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Rheingold:2001:276).

However, in advocating virtual communities as communities, Rheingold continues to use terms to distinguish between the online and offline environment, using phrases such as 'virtual', 'real life', 'authentic' and referring to his 'flesh-and-blood family' to describe social relations in the offline, material world (Rheingold:2001:273).

There have been criticisms made of the term ‘virtual communities’, and Nessim Watson states that ‘using the word ‘virtual’ implies that what we are trying to call community is not *actually* community’ (Watson:1997:129). Taking on board Watson’s criticisms, I have used the words ‘virtual’ and ‘real life’ in inverted commas to highlight the complexities involved in such terms. Nevertheless conceptual distinctions need to be maintained between offline and online lives in order to preserve conceptual clarity and to observe the specificity of communication on the WWW. There are many issues that arise in online or ‘virtual’ communities that relate specifically to the online environment, and there are examples of sensitive issues discussed by male personae online which are, arguably, raised as a result of the anonymity permitted by websites such as *menshealth.co.uk*. Indeed, the capacity for anonymity is a central defining factor in distinguishing between online and offline communities. As Watson states with respect to interaction in ‘virtual’ communities, ‘the medium inherently prevents the interpersonal identification and judgement processes by which we normally evaluate each other in face-to-face interaction’ (Watson:1997:107).

In my own research there has been evidence of real life ‘meets’ between members of *menshealth.co.uk*, usually organised in British pubs in local areas around the country. While I will not explore the practices of online social ‘meets’ as they occur outside of the context of the internet, the space for both ‘meets’ and ‘gym buddies’ to be arranged is significant to a reading of the type of community structure offered by *menshealth.co.uk*. Indeed, in Chapter 8 I question how the different structuring of



*FHM.com* and *menshealth.co.uk* is reflected through notions of community, the ability to build friendships and the organisation of social meets. In arguing the case for virtual communities as communities, Rheingold stated that,

People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries (Rheingold:2001:74).

Furthermore, while online participants do leave their physical body behind in the sense that they are communicating as disembodied personae via computer networks, the body can still be seen as a defining presence online in the spaces provided by men's magazine websites. Reference to the physical body appears both visually and linguistically through dialogues in *FHM.com* and *menshealth.co.uk*. In Chapter 8 I examine how the body provides a basis for discussion and allows users to construct communities that bear markers of physical distinction that are evident in the world outside of the internet. In particular, I analyse the ways that women's bodies are invoked through narrative in the online environment, and I question how such representations contribute to gender distinctions and are implicated in conceptions of heterosexual masculinity.

### Geographical Boundaries, Class and Internet Access

As a global phenomenon, the internet has offered minority groups and political organisations the chance to exchange ideas and meet like-minded people without the restriction of geographical and national boundaries. In *Cyberspace and Disadvantaged Communities* Christopher Mele demonstrated how the internet could be used as a tool

for collective action, citing the example of how Afro-American women residents in North Carolina USA fought against exclusion from a housing development committee's redevelopment planning process in their local area (Mele:1999:291-2). In this essay Mele outlined how the disadvantaged social positioning of the local residents prevented access to knowledge on a local level, yet the internet offered residents the opportunity for collective action, the space to create a website and provided access to e-mail as a form of mass communication. Writers such as Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein, and Sadie Plant have also highlighted the opportunities for groups such as feminists to interact with one another on the internet, and have discussed the ways that the WWW has provided space to explore boundaries and disperse information (Hawthorne and Klein:1999, Plant:2000). As Plant states, 'network culture still appears to be dominated by both men and masculine intentions and designs. But there is more to cyberspace than meets the male gaze' (Plant:2000:325).

The WWW transcends geographic locality, and has extended the cultural climate by expanding access to knowledge without the interference of national boundaries. However, there are material (dis)advantages linked to internet access, and factors such as class and economic status must be acknowledged in any analysis. The Mintel market research report *Leisure and the Internet* noted that 44% of the UK population have access to the internet, however usage was reportedly concentrated amongst ABC1s, with a national discrepancy that saw the majority of internet users located



around London and the south of England (Mintel:2002:10).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the same Mintel report found that 51% of adult men have internet access in the UK compared to 38% of adult women (Mintel:2002:21-22). While there are inevitable problems with the ways in which statistics are compiled and interpreted, the findings from Mintel point towards a class and gender divide in access to the internet. Indeed, in their media packs, *FHM* and *Men's Health* have used descriptive phrases such as 'home owners', 'early adopters of technology', 'upmarket' and 'intelligent' to market their audience to potential advertisers (Emap Advertising:2001, *Men's Health Online Media Pack*:2003). Indeed, with respect to their target audience, *Men's Health* state that 'with ambition translated into **spending power**, he is reaping the benefits of success' (*Men's Health Online Media Pack*:2003. Original emphasis).

It is not possible to have knowledge of the class background of online participants unless it is explicitly stated in dialogue, and even claims to identity hold drawbacks with respect to deception and authenticity. While we might speculate about the level of education that an online participant has in terms of the use of language, grammar and punctuation, education and eloquence of expression do not *necessarily* correspond with class or economic status. However, I have signalled class as relevant in this chapter to highlight questions of access, and how internet based research cannot necessarily reach economically disadvantaged social groups. The potential of the internet to bring together diverse peoples and to cross geographical boundaries is

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<sup>2</sup> ABC1 is a widely used term in the UK amongst businesses to define consumer groups in order to target audiences. In this instance, ABC1s refers to middle class, non-manual professions.

beyond this project. However, as I noted earlier in this chapter, the contexts of *FHM.com* and *menshealth.co.uk* are built upon social and cultural knowledge of the UK, and the majority of personae identify themselves as British. While there was evidence of worldwide readers on *menshealth.co.uk* during the course of this research project (particularly from the USA), such personae were in a minority, and many message board threads were dependent upon the British social and cultural context. On the message boards there was an invocation of the imagined boundaries of community through deployments of discursive references and repertoires of particular localities. In my own research I also found that the search for ‘gym buddies’ and arrangements for social ‘meets’ were dependent upon readers residing locally in the UK, while discussions of news, celebrities and social events were most frequently linked to the British climate.

### Consciousness Raising, Shared Experiences and the Display of Emotion

During the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s feminist consciousness raising (CR) groups were set up by radical feminists as a means to share women’s everyday lived experiences, to initiate discussion of individual and collective areas of patriarchal oppression and to instigate political action. In their 1969 manifesto the radical feminist collective Redstockings stated,



Our chief task at present is to develop female class consciousness through sharing experience and publicly exposing the sexist foundation of all our institutions. Consciousness-raising is [...] the only method by which we can ensure that our program for liberation is based on the concrete realities of our lives.

The first requirement for raising class consciousness is honesty, in private and in public, with ourselves and other women (Redstockings Manifesto, [www.polisci.utah.edu](http://www.polisci.utah.edu), accessed 01.07.04).

While the culture of *Men's Health* is masculinised and is not politically orientated (although personae can, and do, refer to political subjects online), I have drawn on the example of feminist CR to observe the collective discussion of issues that relate to lived and shared experiences of sexed bodies. Although the small face-to-face groups involved in feminist CR can be seen as diametrically opposed to the large scale online community groups in website message boards, the ways that threads are split often involves smaller scale interaction between a few users (unless the topic of the thread is extremely popular and/or controversial). Both feminist CR and the message boards of *menshealth.co.uk* allow the discussion of physical experiences that are seen to relate to one's identity as women and men respectively. The message boards on websites such as *menshealth.co.uk* have been established and designed primarily for men, and as I discuss in Chapter 8, the conflict that exists amongst some users with the presence of women can draw parallels for comparison with conflict in feminist CR groups. In Chapter 8 I consider how the message boards on *menshealth.co.uk* offer men a safe space (through the anonymity offered by use of personae) to discuss a wide variety of issues, concerns and insecurities that relate to identities as heterosexual men. There is also room offered for gay men with especially dedicated boards on 'Sexuality', where issues relating to identity, coming out as gay or intimate matters of sex can be discussed. Emotions, insecurities and anxieties that have traditionally been considered

‘unmasculine’ are given voice on *menshealth.co.uk*, and in Chapter 8 I analyse some of the ways that men express themselves when they talk to each other, self-consciously, as men.

The online environment can be seen to aid emotional discourses for men who have traditionally been seen as emotionally distanced and inept at displays of affection. In his writing on masculinities and schooling Mairtin Mac an Ghaill described the difficulties that boys had in expressing emotions amongst their peers, with boys feeling the need to uphold strong macho images and to distance themselves from any expression of femininity or homosexuality (Mac an Ghaill:1994). In *The Myth of Masculinity* Joseph Pleck suggested that men’s emotional insecurity was related to strong masculine identities that were harmful to men’s health, and in arguing *The Case for Men’s Studies*, Harry Brod supported this view (Brod:1987b:53). Brod also claimed that male sex roles were damaging to men’s physical health with respect to mortality (Brod:1987b:55). Furthermore, whilst Brod saw feminist politics as relevant to men’s studies, he claimed that there should also be focus upon ‘how male emotional restraint also confers power on men, in large part by effectively withholding information about oneself’ (Brod:1987a:8). As Victor Seidler summarises, ‘often as men we are bereft of an emotional language which allows us to identify and articulate our experience’ (Seidler:1994:111). The potentially anonymous space provided by *menshealth.co.uk* allows men to communicate emotions with the expectation of feedback from other board users who relate to experiences as ‘men’. Of course,



emotional discourses are not the only point of reference for online dialogues between male personae, and there are a variety of ways in which men speak to one another, utilising a wide range of topics from emotional issues to their opinions on women, fitness, fashion and grooming. However, the dialogues available on the *Men's Health* message boards display a wide variety of emotional traits and present a challenge to notions that men are not able to engage with emotions. In Chapter 8 I consider the extent to which websites such as *menshealth.co.uk* offer men a form of CR, and whether this website can offer support, advice and a site of resistance for men against stereotypical notions of white, heterosexual masculinities as powerful, dominating and oppressive identities.

In his work on *Telling Sexual Stories*, Ken Plummer built an argument for what he termed the 'sociology of stories' (Plummer:1995:18). Through the analysis of intimate narratives on subjects ranging from women's experiences of rape to gay and lesbian coming out stories, Plummer revealed how stories play an intimate part in peoples lives. In *Telling Sexual Stories*, Plummer claimed that stories were an intrinsic aspect of culture, and have contributed to perceptions of identity. As a symbolic interactionist, Plummer placed emphasis upon interaction and interpretation, and analysed texts as social spaces rather than as abstracted from social reality, positioning stories as '*socially produced in social contexts by embodied concrete people experiencing the thoughts and feelings of everyday life*' (Plummer:1995:16. Original

emphasis). In his work, Plummer reconstituted the notion of community and stated that,

Here is the making of a new kind of community of support—one that is not based on locale, or any kind of direct face to face contact, but based on media. Sharing a common experience through books, or television or computers, is one of the most distinctive features of telling sexual stories in the modern world. Stories are told; stories are read; communities are born. But it can all be done at a distance. (Plummer:1995:45).

In websites such as *menshealth.co.uk* people are given space to construct shared dialogues based upon their lived everyday experiences, and give voice to many forms of experience that generate wider debates on identity and the status of masculinity. In this thesis I will be looking at identities from the opposite end of the spectrum to Plummer, using dialogues from heterosexual male personae, identities that have traditionally possessed power. However, in Chapter 8 I examine the complexities involved in conceptions of white heterosexual masculinities, analysing areas of insecurity as well as power in the wider communal space. I also question how dialogues in men's online magazines build communities that focus upon common experiences as men, and examine how wider identities of women and gay men figure in spaces that are primarily orientated towards heterosexual men. In Chapter 8 I will observe how gender is constructed through interactive communities, reconstituting gender identity work as gender community work. Using conceptual tools from Mikhail Bakhtin's essays on speech genres, I question how dialogic communities function as spaces for men to deconstruct identities through the positioning of 'Others'. Therefore I will now turn to a discussion of Bakhtin's work on dialogism and the construction of identity, paying particular attention to his writings on utterances, speech genres, heteroglossia and the positioning of 'Others' in the dialogic imagination.



## Dialogism and the Formation of Speech Communities

Bakhtin's work is central to my understanding of how knowledge is produced dialogically through language that has roots in social contexts, and the conceptual tools offered by Bakhtin have allowed me to theorise a relationship between gender identity work and gender community work. As I have discussed above, since the rise of the internet, communities have shifted and re-formed in many different directions. Ken Plummer has pointed out that such shifts can be seen in media cultures generally since,

The media is increasingly generating its own fictive communities, interpretive communities, communities of memory. Here, people consuming media come to identify with a social world or community without any direct face to face relating. Media 'audiences' hence become sources for sensing new communities and new social worlds—sharing common stories, icons, memories (Plummer:1995:44).

Bakhtin's emphasis upon language as a social act is important to my interpretation of the online websites of *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com*, and his emphasis upon 'Otherness' and interconnected speech can be seen to introduce the idea of community into notions of identity and the positioning of the self. Bakhtin's view that speech must be analysed as a chain of conversation is appropriate to the online context of the message boards on *menshealth.co.uk* where dialogic exchanges are open, interactive and ongoing.

As a literary critic, Bakhtin's work on dialogism primarily focused upon written texts and most particularly the novel. However Bakhtin also deconstructed the spoken word, including theorising conversations as socially positioned utterances and speech genres in his essay *The Problem of Speech Genres*, thus providing a basis from which

to conduct social research that questioned interaction, identity and power relations at the level of language. In contrast to semioticians such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Bakhtin refused to isolate language and subject it to decontextualised study as abstracted, individual linguistic forms.<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin's primary unit of analysis was the utterance, both spoken and written, and the ways in which utterances formed 'relatively stable types' of speech patterns that he named speech genres (Emerson and Holquist:1986:60). Bakhtin stated that, 'speech is always cast in the form of an utterance belonging to a particular speaking subject, and outside this form it cannot exist' (Emerson and Holquist:1986:71). Bakhtin used utterances and speech genres to analyse both the micro and macro levels of speech communication, so that speech genres highlighted the whole of the speech utterance, placing it into wider social contexts and in relation to the positioning of audiences. Bakhtin stated that,

We select the type of sentence from the standpoint of the *whole* utterance, which is transmitted in advance to our speech imagination and which determines our choice. The idea of the form of the whole utterance, that is, of a particular speech genre, guides us in the process of our speaking (Emerson and Holquist:1986:81. Original emphasis).

According to Bakhtin, what semoticians such as Saussure failed to acknowledge was the existence of speech genres: cultural and contextually guided dialogues that 'when the speaker's speech plan with all its individuality and subjectivity is applied and adapted to a chosen genre, [is] shaped and developed within a certain generic form' (Emerson and Holquist:1986:78).

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<sup>3</sup> The work of Saussure on semiology and linguistics will not be used in this thesis. However I will provide an analysis of certain aspects of Saussure's work as it provides a point of contrast to the writings of later semiotician Roland Barthes in Chapter 5.



The analysis of communication as speech genres is particularly relevant to my analysis in Chapter 8 where I will deconstruct online dialogues in *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com*.<sup>4</sup> In Chapter 8 I analyse how affiliations are formed between community members through online speech communities, and I examine the forms of speech genres used by male personae when questioning identity and locating the self in the context of the internet message boards studied. Bakhtin elaborated upon the importance of compositional structure, style, grammar and intonation in speech genres, as all being of import in the analysis of written dialogue and affecting interpretation. With respect to the extra verbal gestures that Bakhtin discussed, online participants have become sophisticated in signifying intonation and gestures through the use of punctuation marks, abbreviations and emoticons. For example, punctuation marks such as :-), emoticons ☺, or abbreviations such as LOL (to Laugh Out Loud) are often displayed on internet websites to signify facial expressions and feelings of happiness, and are akin to non-verbal gestures in spoken forms of communication.

In *The Problem of Speech Genres*, Bakhtin highlighted the importance of positioning the speaking subject in the context of interaction, so that language and understanding cannot be decontextualised and viewed abstractly. As Bakhtin stated,

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<sup>4</sup> In Chapter 8, emphasis will be placed upon the dialogic exchange visible on *menshealth.co.uk*, since this website incorporates narrative structure that contrasts with the primarily visual content of *FHM.com*.

But the utterance is related not only to preceding, but also to subsequent links in the chain of speech communication. When a speaker is creating an utterance, of course, these links do not exist. But from the very beginning, the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created. As we know, the role of the *others* for whom the utterance is constructed is extremely great [...] is not that of passive listeners, but of active participants in speech communication (Emerson and Holquist:1986:94. Original emphasis).

In the above passage, Bakhtin highlighted the importance of context in the chain of speech, and also the positioning of the anticipated listener/audience response. The positioning of ‘Others’ is a central aspect of online interaction, and in Chapter 8 I analyse how the identities of ‘Others’ are located and positioned by men who identify as the white, heterosexual male norm. As an extension of dialogism, I have also used discourse analysis and the concept of intertextuality to frame the wider cultural factors involved in conversation and written dialogues.<sup>5</sup> As I discuss in Chapter 5, context and wider discursive influences are essential elements in the analysis of how texts and interactive dialogues are socially and culturally positioned. It is also necessary to take into account the structure of texts, and the way that structure affects interaction with websites and other readers, and with this in mind I now turn to a discussion of Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia.

Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia accounts for the space set for multiple, dissenting voices in speech communication, allowing one to understand the context of setting and structure alongside the individuality of utterances. In contrast to monoglossia, heteroglossia describes the conditions required for multiple voices, providing the space

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<sup>5</sup> Research methods and methodological rationale will be discussed in Chapter 5.



for dissent and conflict. The concept of heteroglossia has been useful to my research on internet message boards in helping me to understand the complexities of men's magazine websites as a site of collective readership and conflicting narratives.

Centripetal and centrifugal forces combine to form heteroglossia, a term used to describe the space for interaction between dissenting, multiple voices and subject positions that are given equal opportunity to express opinion. Robert Stam suggests that centripetal and centrifugal forces can also be conceived as hegemonic and oppositional so that 'the process is conflictual, involving an orchestration of the diverse 'voices' responsible for assembling the text, a process that leaves traces and discordances in the text itself' (Stam:1989:221). Heteroglossia offers space for dissent and transgression in dialogue, a form of double-voiced (or multiple) discourse that is similar to, yet also distinct from, Bakhtin's conception of polyphony. The distinctions between heteroglossia and polyphony are not always clear, and these terms occasionally overlap.<sup>6</sup> However, in her analysis of the writings of Bakhtin and his colleagues Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Voloshinov, Pam Morris suggests that heteroglossia is linked to discourses that incorporate conflict or 'foregrounds the clash of antagonistic social

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, on this subject, Eric Dickens submitted an e-mail to the Bakhtin Centre at Sheffield University that asked the question, 'Are 'polyphony' [?], 'polyglossia' [mnogoyazychie], 'heteroglossia' [raznorechia], 'double-voiced' [?] and 'dialogism' [dialogizm] synonymous, or not? If not, why can't someone come up with a clear unequivocal definition ...' (Dickens, 'Are 'polyphony' [?], ' 'polyglossia' [mnogoyazychie], 'heteroglossia' [raznorechia], 'double-voiced' [?] and 'dialogism' [dialogizm] synonymous, or not?', accessed 05.04.04).

On the same Bakhtin Centre e-mail group, Ken Hirschkop (an academic who has written extensively on Bakhtin) stated, 'Before this translation business gets out of hand: polyphony, polyglossia, heteroglossia, dialogism, and double-voicedness are all separate terms in Bakhtin's Russian texts - no one is playing any tricks here. The bad news: Bakhtin does indeed have a habit of using closely related and overlapping terms without making the distinctions between them clear' (Hirshkop, 'Re: Polyphony = polyglossia = heteroglossia = dialogism?', accessed 05.02.04).

forces', whereas in polyphonic discourse 'author's and heroes interact on equal terms' (Morris:1994:249).

It is not my intention to provide an analysis of the conceptual distinctions between heteroglossia and polyphony in this chapter, but rather, to incorporate Bakhtinian ideas that are relevant to my own analysis of the speech used within heterosexual masculine communities. I have used heteroglossia as a way to understand the structure of message boards and the degree to which *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com* permit multiple voices that include conflict, dissent and transgression. Furthermore, heteroglossia provides a framework to analyse the ways that personae simultaneously shape and are shaped by the context of message boards and men's magazines. In Chapter 8 I analyse how the respective structures of *FHM.com* and *menshealth.co.uk* provide space for forms of dissent and transgression, most particularly with the participation of women and gay personae on *menshealth.co.uk*. Heteroglossia can also be compared with Bakhtin's notion of carnival, since both concepts provide the space for analysing acts of dissent and transgression. However, whereas carnival exists as a temporary suspension of hierarchical, hegemonic relationships, heteroglossia is the space provided for dissent that exists *within* hegemonic power relationships. As Robert Stam suggests, heteroglossia is a state of multiplicity, and 'within a Bakhtinian approach, there is no unitary text, no unitary producer, no unitary spectator; rather, there is a conflictual heteroglossia pervading producer, text, context, and reader/viewer' (Stam:1989:221).



According to Bakhtin, identity and self-perception are relative and shifting, with communication reflecting how we position ourselves in relation to the 'Other', whether this 'Other' is a real or an imagined recipient. For example, imagined recipients of dialogue can be found in diary entries where one might write to the diary as a person, and similar patterns can be found online where message board participants write dialogues to the general public without necessarily knowing the intended recipient. In his examination of Bakhtin and dialogism, Michael Holquist neatly summarises that 'in dialogism, the very capacity to have consciousness is based on *otherness*' (Holquist:1990:18. Original emphasis). The idea that identity is relative and shifting corresponds with my own view that masculinities are culturally based, shifting and interdependent, and while I analyse the 'construction' of heterosexual masculinities in men's lifestyle magazines, I am simultaneously aware of the changes that occur in historical, social and cultural contexts, and the negotiation work involved in positioning heterosexual masculinities. Bakhtin's work on dialogism has facilitated my analysis of speech at both the micro level (as utterances and stylised compositional structures) and macro level (in terms of speech genres and discursive power relations). The interactive aspects of dialogism provide a basis from which to deconstruct utterances, the dialogue between subjects, and also the dynamics of the wider community. Furthermore, speech genres form to indicate power relations, the positioning of 'Others' and the normative structures of the respective community.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have reviewed key concepts that are relevant to my reading of online masculinities and have located my work as part of a wider debate on the articulation of gendered online communities. The research conducted by feminists on technologies and computer networks has helped me to understand the sexism that is often involved in the production of technologies, and some of the ways sexism can be introduced in design and application. The design and application of technology is discussed in Chapter 8 where I analyse how visual software technology is used in men's online magazines to objectify the bodies of 'Others'. In Chapter 8 I question whether women's bodies are employed to recreate old stereotypes, to position 'virtual' women as carnal sexual objects, and to reconstruct the dualisms of patriarchal cultures. As Anne Balsamo has stated in relation to cybertechnologies, 'it is just as likely that these new technologies will be used primarily to tell old stories – stories that reproduce, in high-tech guise, traditional narratives about the gendered, race-marked body' (Balsamo:1996:132).

Message boards provide an ideal space to observe dialogic interaction, since they are not only readily transcribed dialogues, but they also allow readers the space for reflection on what they intend to communicate. In this thesis I analyse how the anonymity provided by message board posts allows men to relate and bond with one another as male subjects. Using concepts of heteroglossia and speech genres I also examine the space provided for resistance to normative notions of white, heterosexual



masculinities as dominant and powerful. Online message boards have allowed me to analyse how readers construct self-identities, desire and difference, and I discuss the findings of my research into online communities and the construction of heterosexual masculinities in Chapter 8. In Chapters 2, 3 and 4 I have outlined the conceptual tools utilised in this project. Therefore, I now move to a discussion of the research methods used in this thesis, and will also outline the methodological rational for this project on the construction and articulation of white, heterosexual masculinities in men's lifestyle magazines.

# Chapter 5

## Research Methods and Methodology

In this chapter I have set out the key methodological strategies that are drawn upon in this thesis. I begin by locating the methodological field before discussing the central research methods (including the choices made with regard to research methods), and then finally, the broader methodological issues that arose from the research field. In this thesis I have used text-based and audience research to examine both the shifts in modes of representation (for white heterosexual masculinities) as well as the changing relationships of audiences to online forms of readership (as online speech communities). I have employed semiology, discourse analysis and non-participant observation to examine the construction and negotiation of gendered identities and gendered communities in *FHM*, *FHM.com*, *Men's Health* and *menshealth.co.uk*. In analysing the printed text I have drawn upon semiology and discourse analysis to both deconstruct the processes of producing images and to locate production in the wider discursive/intertextual field. Non-participant observation was employed to position audiences within the text, and also provided access to vast audience dialogues on a diverse range of subjects that were located within the production of magazines as gendered communities. The shift from text-based analysis to online modes of research has presented new openings for reading relations and research into magazine cultures



as communities. I now continue to outline my rationale for engaging with textual/intersubjective forms of magazine representation and readership.<sup>1</sup>

## Locating the Methodological Field

This thesis is located in the mode of popular visual culture analysis, particularly the semiotic traditions characteristic of lifestyle magazine analyses, and internet based community research. The work conducted is innovative in both its use of analytical strategies that are associated with the grotesque and the use of interactive contexts for audience research. In the deconstruction of visual images from men's magazines I have identified how the male body is positioned ambiguously both with respect to the conceptions of the idealized and the grotesque body. The grotesque offers new areas for the analysis of the male body, and in analysing the grotesque repertoires in men's magazines I have challenged the basis of the grotesque as intrinsically feminine or feminising. Therefore, this thesis is also positioned in debates on grotesque forms of representation, and I have used semiology to unpack images of the grotesque body in order to uncover the diversity in forms of the grotesque body as well as the varying implications for the construction of masculinity.

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<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to note at the outset that the use of message board posts do not necessarily reflect the interests of the magazine. As *Men's Health* state 'We shall accept no responsibility for your use of our message board and discussion group facility. You are responsible for the content of your messages and the consequences of any such messages. We cannot and do not review every submission a user may make. We neither endorse nor guarantee the accuracy or propriety of any submission' (*menshealth.co.uk*, 'About Us: Message Boards', accessed 12.09.04). However, those who post to message boards are participating in the cultural environment of men's magazines, and it is the cultural shifts in concepts of masculinity that are the foundation to this research project.

The shift to online modes of readership is a new area of development in the study of men's magazines, and while there has been a long tradition in the analysis of printed magazines, the transition from printed men's lifestyle magazines (as singular forms of readership) to online forms of collective readership represents new openings for cultural/media analysis. In the analysis of online readership, this project rethinks a long tradition of text based/audience research, and indicates tensions in the argued rationales that have characteristically shaped audience based research. The tension that arises from audience negotiation in text-based research is repositioned in the online context where readers directly interact with texts from within the research field. As I explore in Chapter 8, where conditions for heteroglossia exist, online magazines are no less dialogic than traditional forms of audience research.<sup>2</sup> The online environment has triggered a shift in reading/writing practices that have allowed audiences to reflect, negotiate and construct identities within the text, thus contributing to processes of production. I have developed my analysis of men's magazine cultures to reflect changes in the format of the medium, the changing environment for audience participation and also to access homosocial male communities that would otherwise be difficult to reach.

In tracing the shifts of audience interaction with magazine cultures (from singular to collective/ intersubjective readership) I have demonstrated how audience research can be conducted via text. Since the late 1990s, there have been many developments in

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<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia (the use of multiple voices within a text) was discussed in Chapter 4 and will be employed as a conceptual tool in Chapter 8.



‘virtual’ ethnographic approaches to online communities, and in Chapter 4 I outlined debates concerning the role of online interaction in everyday life, and whether online forms of communication can be read as community interaction. In online community research there are questions attached to the status of the researcher, and how the researcher functions as part of the interactive community. For example, in Howard Rheingold’s seminal study of the online community WELL, he justified using the term ‘community’ through his own emotional attachment, and described online participants as ‘a family of invisible friends’ (Rheingold:2001:272). This problem has also been associated with more ‘traditional’ forms of ethnographic participant observation research with the notion of ‘going native’ being used to describe the development of emotional attachments to the research situation. In my own work I have avoided direct participation in the community, and while this in itself raises many issues that relate to authenticity and ethics, the aims of my research require the observation of/interaction with media texts as they ‘normally’ exist. The work in this thesis is positioned within developments in online community analyses, and offers new directions in analysing how readers engage with online communities that are developed around speech genres that emerge from offline printed texts.

## **Research Methods**

### Semiology

Semiology was employed in this thesis as a method for visual deconstruction in order to critically unpack the images displayed in men’s lifestyle magazines, and also as a way

to explore the wider intertextual and cultural factors involved in image production. As Gillian Rose suggests, 'semiology offers a very full box of analytical tools for taking an image apart and tracing how it works in relation to broader systems of meaning' (Rose:2001:69). Semiology was first used a method for linguistic analysis by theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914) in order to provide a scientific structure to the analysis of language as a system of meaning. While I do not intend to review the work of Saussure and Pierce in this chapter, it is important to understand the influence of Saussure on the later semiotician and cultural analyst Roland Barthes, a writer whose work brought semiology into the visual field of representation. The work of Barthes was significant for introducing a wider scope to the semiological project, for analysing images as signs and sign systems without losing sight of the wider contextual and intertextual factors that are involved in the (de)construction of images.

Saussure's influence on the work of Barthes was primarily a result of his identification of signs, signifiers and signifieds in language systems, and also the distinction made between *paroles* as individualised speech acts and *langue* as wider systems of meaning (de Saussure:1974). The division of the signifier and signified is crucial in understanding how signs are divided between mode of representation and the underlying messages that lie within the image displayed. From the 1950s Roland Barthes used semiology to deconstruct a wide variety of mediums from art to advertising and fashion in order to reveal their underlying signification. In Barthes'



work, the process of signification can further be analysed as denotation and connotation, with the primary importance accorded to connotation, a second order signification that encourages readings on many levels. Barthes stated that ‘... denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than *last* of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and to close the reading)...’ (Barthes:1993b:9). Barthes further elaborated upon the distinction between the signifier and signified, and denotation and connotation to introduce a third dimension to semiotic analysis, the production of myths. Barthes claimed that,

In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern which I have just described: the signifier, signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it *is a second-order semiological system* (Barthes:1993a:114 Original emphasis).

Conceptualising the split between the signifier and signified, denotation and connotation has allowed researchers to understand the prevailing myths that surround images, myths that can provide a key to understanding how producers target their audiences, and how media audiences are positioned. Semiology allows reflection upon the process involved in the production of the image, and to consider symbolic and ideological implications, as well as multiple readings and interpretation. However, while the production of myths was a central aspect of Barthes’ work on semiological deconstruction, I have used the notion of intertextuality and discourse analysis as preferred concepts to deconstruct and infer the wider discursive influences upon the production of texts.

The semiological deconstruction of visual images has allowed me to comprehensively deconstruct images as part of wider textual, social and cultural systems of meaning. The concept of intertextuality is essential to my research process, and can be read in relation to discourse analysis insofar as intertextuality takes into account wider discursive influences upon the production of texts (I discuss discourse analysis later in this chapter). The notion of intertextuality is also compatible with dialogism, and Julia Kristeva used the term intertextuality in her essay *Word, Dialogue and the Novel* and her discussion of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, stating that 'the notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double' (Kristeva:1980:66. Original emphasis). Intertextuality has allowed me to understand how texts are multivalent, and despite the differences between writers such as Barthes, Bakhtin, Foucault and Kristeva, each writer has highlighted how texts are never final and function as part of continuous dialogue (Barthes:1993b, Holquist:1990, Foucault:1989, Kristeva:1980). Intertextuality is frequently used in media and cultural studies in order to account for the ways in which texts relate both to one another, and also the wider cultural systems and language. For example, in *FHM* there are intertextual references that point to the influence of freak shows, soft-core pornography, British bawdy humour, comic traditions such as *Viz*, and television programmes that test the limits of endurance such as *Jackass*. I have also taken account of intertextuality at the level of production and signification, so that photographic images and dialogues are seen to act within wider systems of meaning that are culturally intelligible to members of the respective communities.



Above I have offered a reading of the key conceptual/theoretical underpinnings of the semiological work conducted by Roland Barthes as a central influence upon my own analysis of media texts. In my research I employed semiology to unpack images of the male body as reflections upon the contextual positioning of masculinity and the cultural ethos of *FHM* and *Men's Health*. I have also deconstructed advertisements that appeared in the contexts of *FHM* and *Men's Health* and which demonstrated particularly ambiguous codes in the positioning of the male body as erotic. At the onset of my research I was informed by my central research questions, and these inevitably guided the subsequent use of semiology as an analytical tool and the final selection of material for semiotic deconstruction. In selecting material for semiological deconstruction I started with an initial period of categorising images as broadly related to conceptions of idealized and grotesque bodies. From the accumulated sets of images I then began a process of detailed semiological deconstruction in order to extract areas of thematic repetition that would later become key themes in the positioning of white, heterosexual male bodies in the respective magazine contexts. In this project I have self-consciously used images that display white bodies (although there are grotesque images of male bodies in Chapter 7 that show darker skin tones that could be associated with Mediterranean/North African ancestry and one video still shot of black women dancing). While *FHM* and *Men's Health* are not 'white' texts (indeed, both titles often display black bodies), the majority of models and men featured are white, and therefore I have analysed how 'whiteness' fits into the production of idealized bodies. In the deconstruction of the grotesque, the bodies displayed were also overwhelmingly white, however the negative positioning of disabled

bodies (and hypersexual women) as ‘freaks’ became the most dominant issue in the construction of the grotesque. Through the use of semiology and discourse analysis (and a limited application of psychoanalysis) I was provided with deconstructive tools that took into account the process of production alongside intertextual and discursive repertoires.

Before moving on to an account of my use of discourse analysis, I will briefly turn to the discussion of feminist psychoanalysis as a theoretical tool that was drawn upon alongside semiology as a method of analysis. While semiology and psychoanalysis offer very distinct approaches to audience/media relations, both permit the positioning of audiences in text-based research. As a research method, semiology has enabled feminists working in media and cultural studies to critically unpack representations of the body and to question how media producers implicitly and explicitly maintain gender distinctions that serve to objectify women and uphold patriarchal/hegemonic gender relations. Similarly, feminist psychoanalysis has offered diverse ways to interpret gender relations at the level of psychosocial development, and the work of psychoanalysts such as Laura Mulvey and Julia Kristeva are drawn upon throughout this thesis. I have discussed the work of Mulvey on the male gaze in Chapter 2, and Kristeva’s writings on abjection in Chapter 3, and therefore I will not reiterate their work in this chapter. However, it is important to point out here the influence of feminist psychoanalysis, and how concepts of the male gaze and abjection have supported my semiotic deconstruction. Through the male gaze and abjection I have



theorised the process of spectatorship as it relates to viewing images of the idealized and grotesque body. However, in theorising the process of spectatorship I do not intend to impose determinist viewpoints on gender relations and spectatorship. Rather, I have employed psychoanalytic terms in order to read the possibilities of viewing relations, and to delineate the tensions invoked by media representations.

### Discourse Analysis

Many researchers in the social sciences have employed discourse analysis to examine cultural texts, yet as a research method discourse analysis is difficult to define. I have used the concept of discourse throughout my work as a way to conceptualise and deconstruct bodies of knowledge that impact upon social and cultural understandings of gender identities as they are positioned in men's lifestyle magazines. Discourse analysis was first introduced to me through the work of Michel Foucault, and his discursive analyses of power, the body and the gaze have been particularly influential in my work. However, as writers such as Derek Hook and Niels Akerstrom-Andersen have claimed, part of the difficulty in defining discourse analysis lies in the fact that Foucault did not create a comprehensive theory or method of analysis (Hook:2001, Akerstrom-Anderson:2003). Nevertheless, Hook has stated three conditions that underlie Foucault's conception of discourse: knowledge, materiality and power (Hook:2001:542). Foucault used the term discourse as a conceptual tool to analyse the constitution of subjects in social contexts, and to understand the working of power through institutions, bodies and social and cultural norms. The use of discourse

analysis has provided interpretative freedom, and usefully indicates the broad set of power relationships influencing the production of images and processes of spectatorship.

In Foucault's work, power is complex and analysed for the ways in which it both controls the subject and offers resistance. In *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* Foucault outlined how power relations were discursively produced, allowing for analyses of power relations on many intersecting levels, thus providing space for the productive aspects of power and resistance. Foucault stated that, 'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (Foucault:1998:93). In his essay on *The Order of Discourse*, Foucault further established links between discourse, power and desire, claiming that the ubiquitous nature of discourses meant that,

Their effect is to make it virtually impossible to think outside them. To think outside them is, by definition, to be mad, to be beyond comprehension and therefore reason. It is in this way that we can see how discursive rules are linked to the exercise of power; how the forms of discourse are both constituted by, and ensure the reproduction of, the social system, through forms of selection, exclusion and domination (Foucault:1981:48).

In this thesis, discourses form conceptual understandings of the ways that power relations influence gender, sexuality, race and the body in sites such as *FHM* and *Men's Health*. Discourse analysis is used to examine the multitude of influences upon modern day conceptions of white heterosexual masculinities, to read beyond individual images/dialogues, and to understand the wider cultural factors that influence the construction of masculinities in the context of men's magazines.



Discourse analysis aids interdisciplinary research since it provides the freedom to explore many avenues of interpretation in the deconstruction of texts so that researchers can understand how texts work within, and are influenced by, wider social, cultural and historical ideas and contexts. As Sara Mills states, ‘discourse is therefore useful in that it can allow us to analyse similarities across a range of texts as the products of a particular set of power/knowledge relations’ (Mills:1997:23). Discourse analysis has allowed me to read men’s magazines in their wider cultural contexts and with respect to the construction of knowledge and power. Masculinities and men’s lifestyle magazines are products of their social and cultural environments, and wider discursive factors must be taken into account in the process of deconstruction. Discourse analysis permits readings that extend beyond semiological deconstruction of the image on the page and the immediate contextual environment, and calls into question wider factors that impact upon the production and negotiation of texts, over time and space. In his work on *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault drew upon concepts of discipline as they presented themselves in institutions such as prisons, the army and schools to demonstrate the cumulative effects of the disciplinary gaze, across time, upon the production of docile bodies (Foucault:1991). In this thesis I have drawn upon a range of discourses that have influenced the production of idealized bodies (such as concepts of the classical body, consumer culture, the disciplinary regimes of western fitness culture and bio-medical science), grotesque bodies (for example, the female grotesque and concepts of heroism), and the expression of masculinities online (in relation to emotions, insecurity, authority and power). This thesis represents an interdisciplinary project, and whilst grounded in the analysis of *Men’s Health* and *FHM* as media texts,

I have used discourse analysis to move beyond the denotation and connotation of images in order to identify wider discursive power relations as they position white heterosexual male subjects in the text.

### Non-Participant Observation

The final research method that I will discuss is the use of covert non-participant observation (NPO) of online message boards. I decided to conduct covert NPO alongside my text-based analysis in order to examine how readers interacted with one another and the magazine community in everyday life. This part of my analysis primarily concerns the observation of *menshealth.co.uk*, a website that has a very lively and interactive community of users with a high turnover of posts. The non-dialogic structure and design of *FHM.com* places visual interaction, rather than dialogic speech, as central to the reading experience. Consequently, my analysis of *FHM.com* took a different turn and mainly focused upon the semiological deconstruction of visual content, alongside analysis of the speech used by journalists and the limited use of audience interaction via MMS mobile phone texts and reader e-mails.<sup>3</sup>

The vast amount of material from *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com* was difficult to control, and while I frequently read message boards, choices were inevitably made on the selection of material that was used in the final analysis. These choices reflected the

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<sup>3</sup> MMS (multi-media messaging service) is a service available from mobile phone networks that allow photographic as well as written text messages.



prominent themes and issues that emerged from the research situation, and which introduced new dimensions to previous studies of men's magazine cultures and masculinity. One advantage of online research is the fact that data is readily transcribed, and also typed accurately from the perspective and positioning of the author. In quoting dialogues from online participants I have left any inaccuracies of spelling or grammar in order to analyse the narrative as it existed in cyberspace. In the composition of message board posts, readers used a variety of methods to highlight their emotions that ranged from using grammar, punctuation, capitalisation or self crafted emoticons (emoticons do not exist in *FHM.com* and *menshealth.co.uk*, so rather than ☺ symbols, readers would improvise with :-), using punctuation marks to indicate facial expressions). Websites provide access for social researchers to observe or enter communities that are difficult to gain access to in the 'real' world of social interaction.<sup>4</sup> Indeed in my experience, the primary advantage of NPO in the context of online magazines was the unlimited access to ideas, opinions and communities that were largely uninfluenced by the presence of the researcher and which would otherwise be difficult to gain access to. Of course, researcher influence is never absent from the research context, and I will discuss the implications of the decisions I made as a researcher below.

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<sup>4</sup> I have used inverted commas around the word 'real' in order to acknowledge the complexity of contrasting the 'real' and the 'virtual' world. Of course there is a distinction to be made, however many online users indicate that their online dialogues are a part of their real everyday lives.

## Methodological Issues

### The Online Context of Research

‘In real life’ (what online participants frequently term IRL), outside of the context of the internet, NPO holds a different set of problems in comparison with the internet environment. The use of NPO in online websites positions the researcher as a lurker: an invisible presence that observes dialogue as it would normally occur in everyday life between participants. The premise of NPO is to research people and groups from a distance in order to observe interaction in everyday life. For ethnographers, NPO is an alternative to participant observation when a researcher does not physically fit into the group that she intends to study, or is unable to adapt her behaviour to the said group. In the context of online message boards, I was provided with the opportunity to present myself under a variety of personae in order to interact with the community outside of the position of the researcher. However, I made the decision not to undertake participant observation of message boards, and from the outset I intended to analyse the themes and issues raised by personae in online interaction as they related to the central research questions stated at the onset of this project. In clarifying the rationale for my research process, I decided that it was important to read how personae negotiated concepts of masculinity independently, as they would have existed outside of the research context. Furthermore, as I will discuss below, creating and maintaining false, character based personae is extremely complex, deceiving and potentially ethically unsound.



While I have learned a great deal about the culture of *Men's Health* over the course of my research, to participate and be accepted as a male persona is difficult in terms of language style, terminology (especially with regard to fitness, muscle groups and supplements) and also wider cultural factors that relate to life experience. Being inventive with personae is possible, and one could create a variety of personae that fit into or test the stability of *Men's Health* culture. Nevertheless, creating personae would impact upon the context of research in a significant way, and would alter the dynamics of the group environment in ways that were neither necessary nor desired. Constructing elaborate narratives that descend into fiction serve to deceive people who might think of you as a friend and deepen the already present ethical issues involved in online community based research. The ethical implication of creating false personae is therefore questionable, particularly if one builds relationships with other board members that are based upon authenticity and trust. Of course, there are a variety of tactics available to researchers who intend to participate in online communities that do not necessarily involve building close relationships, and indeed one could be open and honest about their positioning as researchers. However, in the online environment, researchers are met with hostility and suspicion, and while I was interested with interaction at the level of personae (not the 'real' people behind the personae), I made a decision that NPO would serve to highlight prominent themes and issues relevant to the group dynamics. Therefore, in conducting non-participant observation, direct reader response to the themes and issues raised in this thesis has been unavailable. However, the orientation of my research did not require me to question the subjects under study in an interview or focus group situation, but rather to observe how men (or

rather, male identified personae) interacted with one another and the magazine environment in real live interaction.

### Respecting Anonymity

In the process of writing up my research findings, I have disguised the usernames of the message board participants that I quote. Furthermore, there has been no attempt to understand the 'real life' identities of the participants in online dialogues. Online usernames provide readers with anonymity and disguise 'real life' identity so that a wide number of issues can be discussed outside of the context of everyday 'real life' interaction. Whilst narratives are often heavily personalised and emotional, the 'real life' identity of the subject is unknown, unless the writer holds an interest in informing other readers, and there are some readers who explicitly refer to their lives outside of the context of the internet. Nevertheless, given that the nature of my research was hidden from the research participants, I made the decision to alter usernames in order to protect online identity. While online usernames are anonymous, many readers use the same usernames across a number of message boards, and so it is therefore necessary to respect the constructed online identity. In the process of my research, ideas, issues and dialogues relevant to the construction of masculinity have been deemed most relevant to the central research questions, rather than the online or offline identities of participants themselves. The relationship between participants has been taken into account on a general level rather than an individual level, so that we can see how different identities are played out online.



## Ethical Issues of Non-Participant Observation and Online Deception

There are ethical questions raised by the use of NPO, primarily because the community is unaware of the presence of a researcher. However, message boards that exist on the WWW are public spaces, and online readers are aware that their narratives are available to a wide audience. Posts that are submitted on message boards are written by online participants to be displayed to anonymous audiences with an anticipated response, and are in this respect are inherently dialogic. Message board posts that exist on the WWW expect responsive dialogue, and the presence of non-participating, non-responsive lurkers is also often acknowledged. As one participant on *menshealth.co.uk* wrote:

I would just like to take this opportunity to say -

Hello to all you lurkers who read this thread without posting and wonder what the F\* \* \* k is going on'

Well lets face it. Ther's probably 1000's of em. Just thought it would be nice to pay them some recognition LOL. Right, time for coffee.

(*menshealth.co.uk*, 'Chatting 12.10.04 - I am Sparticus!', accessed 12.10.04).<sup>5</sup>

Whilst the position of the invisible lurker might be deemed ethically unsound, the internet is a public space and known for its vast audience, whether this audience is visible (through dialogic participation) or invisible (by lurking) to participants.

Furthermore, I have refrained from building false personae and relationships with other online readers in order to prevent deception on a level where the dynamics of the community could be affected.

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<sup>5</sup> LOL is a common online abbreviation for Laughing Out Loud.

Online identities are personae, and as such hold the capacity for creativity and deception. As Sherrie Turkle has observed in her research on Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), many people use the internet as a tool to play with and question identity, and consequently 'the internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with constructions and re-constructions of self that characterise postmodern life' (Turkle:1996:180). However, while internet researchers who do not come face-to-face with the people that they study inevitably face questions that relate to the validity of a subject's identity, there are some ways to detect whether an online reader might be lying, and this primarily relates to inconsistencies in their dialogues. Online readers have developed methods to detect when other participants are likely to have lied, created unnecessary tension and descended into 'trolling' activity, all of which is based upon consistency of narrative and familiarity with the participant.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one can never really know 'truth', and any method of research is susceptible to deception, whether the research takes place face-to-face or from an established distance. In communities such as *menshealth.co.uk*, the background of 'regulars' becomes apparent and inconsistency recognisable to a certain extent. As Sherrie Turkle suggests, 'some people become experienced in recognising real life women and men behind online personae' (Turkle:1996:211).

The structure of *menshealth.co.uk* does not encourage one to play with identity in the same way as MUDs or Virtual Reality, since in these latter examples personae are

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<sup>6</sup> A troll is the name that is given to online readers who participate to lie and cause disruption to the wider community on message board websites that contain a large amount of dialogic interaction.



created through participation in a gaming environment. The *Men's Health* message boards are centred in real life and readers gather together to discuss problems and offer advice. While some will inevitably be creative in their online personae, the structure, content, and editing of message boards resists disruptive participation. In contrast to *menshealth.co.uk*, *FHM.com* is a website that is produced as a space that indulges readers in voyeurism and resists heteroglossia. In *FHM.com*, readers are not encouraged to develop creative personae, and instead offer constrained opinions on the website content under restricted word limits. While I acknowledge the capacity for deception and lies in the online web spaces under study, the fact that online participants *identify* themselves as male, female or gay and have *investments* in the wider community is significant in itself. Any formation of personae can influence the content, direction and flow of conversation, and provides a site of analysis for how heterosexual masculinities are communicated and imagined.

### Feminist Research in Male Dominated Spaces

To gain access to the communities of men's lifestyle magazines that target themselves towards heterosexual men with investments in hegemonic gender relations would be difficult and fraught as a feminist. A key aspect of lad culture involves deriding feminism, using humour that is coated with ostensible irony. The culture of *Men's Health* can be seen as more open to feminism in that liberalism provides space for women to be valued through equal opportunity politics. However, even in *Men's Health*, there are some online readers who express dissatisfaction with the participation

of women in the community and the lack of a truly male dialogic space (this is discussed in Chapter 8). Before choosing my research methods I also took into account issues of security and the ways in which I would have fitted in with the wider community as a researcher. Researching men and masculinities can be a difficult process for a woman, feminist researcher, most particularly when faced with anti-feminist sentiment. For example, in her research on 'Issues of Blood' Sophie Laws used interviews with male respondents in order to identify their attitudes to menstruation, a relatively hidden aspect of women's lives. Laws outlined how her research became personal and painful as a result of the sexism that she was faced with during the research process, and stated that,

My final decision to focus my study on men has on the whole seemed to me to be successful. However there are real problems with this, which I would not wish to minimise. The first of these is the personal cost to the researcher. I have often found my research a painful process, for I have had to make myself pay attention to men's sexist views of myself in a way which I would 'naturally' avoid in any other situation (Laws:1990:216).

There is likely to be an amount of frustration in feminist research that involves an account of hegemonic masculinities and 'lad' culture, and it does help to be aware of such conflict in order to acknowledge researcher bias in analysis and interpretation. Audience research is possible in this context, as has been shown by a number of women researchers working in the area of men's magazines. However, following the advice of my supervisors, and also after having determined the nature of my text-based research, I made a decision not to come face to face with respondents in the research context.



I hold great respect for research methods such as interviews and focus groups that involve face-to-face interaction with audiences, and indeed sociology and cultural studies is indebted to researchers who conduct such fieldwork. However, my work here is self-consciously text-based, and the angle of my research is intended to analyse the construction of masculinities textually, dialogically and discursively. In the choice of NPO as a research method, my intentions were to read the same material and message boards as readers of *FHM* and *Men's Health* would do outside of the research context. Of course, my interpretation and selection of relevant material is not value free. Furthermore, I cannot claim to read message boards in the same way as the online participants studied, myself being a woman feminist researcher. Nevertheless, I have endeavoured to extract themes and issues that recur as prominent and relevant to my central research questions, and which have stood out as key issues of representations and popular dialogic exchanges in the context of the men's magazines. Being a hidden observer of online message boards provided me with unhindered access to online communities, and has allowed me to read opinions, viewpoints and feelings from a wide range of male identified personae that would not be so readily available through the process of interviewing or focus groups. Indeed, there are many emotional dialogues online that are produced through anonymity and which discuss subjects that would not necessarily be approached in a 'real life', face-to-face context.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the research methods that I have used in this project and have provided a rationale that covers the choices made with respect to the use of research methods and my own positioning as a researcher. The analysis of both text and audience has enabled the examination of the shifting terms and tensions in the construction/negotiation of contemporary white heterosexual masculinities. In particular, the shift to online forms of readership has presented new methodological debates on the relationships between audience and text, as well as the role of the researcher in the field of research. My analysis has drawn upon the online context to complicate the relationship between text and audiences, as the audience reads/writes their own positioning in the magazine context. Having detailed the research methods used and my rationale, I will now move to the discussion of idealized bodies as the first analytical chapter of my research. In the discussion of idealized bodies I examine the tensions that surround concepts of the male gaze, ‘ornamental’ masculinities and consumer culture, alongside a deconstruction of disciplinary gazes in the scrutiny of the male body.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In *Stiffed*, Susan Faludi traced the displacement of modern masculinity, and used term ‘ornamental’ to describe the passive positioning of style conscious men in contemporary media cultures (Faludi:2000).



# Chapter 6

## Sculpting the Perfect Body: Masculinity, the Body and Desire in *FHM* and *Men's Health* Magazine

Having outlined my area of investigation, the literatures relevant to my research and the methodological rationale for this project, I will now turn to my analytical work, starting with representations of idealized bodies in *FHM* and *Men's Health*. From my research into *FHM* and *Men's Health* I have observed a split between the two titles with respect to abject and idealized representations. The material presented in this chapter is intended to present one half of an overarching argument in noting how men's magazines are characterised by both idealised and abject dimensions. Abjection and the grotesque will figure as debates in Chapter 7, although discussion of abjection will be introduced in this chapter to demonstrate how the abject runs as a latent force in *Men's Health*. In this chapter, primary focus is placed upon *Men's Health* as a text that avidly promotes the idealized muscular male body. Idealised and grotesque bodies can be traced through the history of men's magazines, however they have emerged into the foreground as the main counter-tendencies in contemporary magazine cultures. These points of divergence are present throughout the printed titles of *FHM* and *Men's Health* in their current incarnations, and they have also emerged as defining points in the presentation of the male body in the shift of both magazines to online forms of readership.

The significance of the shifts to forms of online readership are examined in Chapter 8. In this chapter and the accompanying Chapter 7, I will continue to analyse the divergence of magazine typologies into sub-classifications that foreground idealised and/or abject tendencies through white male bodies, and that constitute an array of competing hegemonic masculinities. Centrally, I also examine how masculinities are embodied as objects of voyeuristic as well as narcissistic fascination, using the counterpoints of the lad versus the Adonis, and the lad versus the athlete, as well as notions of discipline and excess. White masculinities are noted as bodies of aspiration or abjection, and where abjection occurs as a form of male representation, women's bodies also emerge to signify the grotesque as an object of desire alongside the repudiated identities of lads. The work in these chapters expands on previous work deconstructing men's magazines in three respects: the analysis of changes in the current styles of representation with an emphasis placed upon the dichotomies presented by idealized and grotesque male bodies; the use of new tools of analysis to provide new insights (with a focus upon the production of whiteness, abjection, and muscular male bodies); and finally through exploring web-based products and the shift in men's magazine cultures onto the internet as an arena for homosocial bonding.

In this chapter, I use material from the printed titles of *FHM* and *Men's Health* in deconstructing images of idealized bodies, but there is a disproportionate focus on *Men's Health* as the first half of a wider analysis on the idealized and the grotesque. The chapter will begin with analysis of the divergence of men's lifestyle magazines in



recent years regarding the eroticizing regimes of male bodies and the foregrounding of the Adonis in *Men's Health* (Chapter 7 largely exploring the grotesque in *FHM*), then progress to exploration of the figures of Adonis, the athlete and Hercules as typologies of white masculinities, investigating both the extent to which consumer advertising prevents challenges to the male gaze, and to what extent white men have reclaimed the body as an image of masculinity. The third section examines the scrutiny under which (white) men's bodies are placed in men's magazines, considering both the ways in which idealised bodies are promoted through disciplinary regimes, and the implications of scrutinising the male body for readers. This chapter concludes with a consideration of the tensions and negotiations surrounding the increasingly complicated constitution of narcissitic identification in men's lifestyle magazines.

The lad would evade representation as the object of the gaze in the printed version of *FHM*, except that there are spaces within the magazine for advertising, fashion and grooming, all of which are legitimate arenas for the framing of the male body as desirable. In my analysis of the desirable male body, I have used images of front covers and advertisements as spaces where idealized visions of the body are prominent and marketed to readers of the respective magazines. In order to understand how *Men's Health* and *FHM* differentially construct 'perfect' bodies, and subsequently sell this ideal to readers, I start this chapter with close deconstruction of the composition of front covers as the initial image being sold to consumers. Nick Stevenson, Peter Jackson and Kate Brooks have claimed that front covers are the most important aspect

of magazines, since they form the immediate selling point to audiences (Stevenson, Jackson and Brooks:2000:369). Front covers portray the ethos of the respective title in a condensed visual form, with headlines and captions outlining what readers can expect to find in the content, as well as serving to anchor images and encourage dominant readings. Magazine covers are spaces that draw in readers, signifying both the genre and style of the title. In the analysis of idealized bodies, I also use advertising images as spaces where men are framed as desirable in both *FHM* and *Men's Health*.

Advertisements are important to men's magazines for numerous reasons. Glossy magazines are dependent upon advertising for revenue but they also underlie magazines as a sub-text (as well as counter-text) to the editorial content. I therefore focus upon how images of the Adonis run as a sub-text in *Men's Health* and a counter-text to *FHM*, where the latter magazine, despite holding a clear investment in fashion and grooming, constructs the lad as a contradictory, rebellious figure.

## **The Divergence in Men's Magazines in the Eroticising Regimes of Men's Bodies**

Both *FHM* and *Men's Health* represent distinctive magazine brands that promote different ideals of heterosexual masculinity. The primary points of divergence concern the predominance of women's bodies and grotesque bodies in *FHM*, and idealized forms of the muscular male body in *Men's Health*. *FHM* does not gaze upon the bodies of lads, and masculinity is instead constructed around the consumption of 'Others', as well as through excessive practices, pranks and billingsgate speech genres.



While the bodies of lads are present through journalists and readers' photographs, they evade desiring gazes, and are constructed as prurient consumers of women. In contrast, while women's bodies do feature in *Men's Health* as objects of the male gaze, their positioning remains subordinate to the overwhelming numbers of photographs of muscular men. *Men's Health* is built around the male body, and masculinity directly relates to disciplinary regimes of fitness and health. I now turn to present a detailed semiological deconstruction of two cover images from *Men's Health* and *FHM* in order to comprehensively unpack underlying connotations that relate to the production of heterosexual masculinities in the respective titles.

The front cover image inserted (on the next page) is from *Men's Health* May 2003, and here we see a narcissistic representation of the *Men's Health* man, a man who is not scared to show, look and smile at his own body with an implied feeling of satisfaction.



Figure 6.1<sup>1</sup>



The cover model in this photograph is represented as a sexual subject. Not only is he observing his own body with ostensible satisfaction, shorts hanging low from the waist to reveal the v-shaped lines of his lower abdomen, but the subtitles 'More sex, more often. Get it now!' and 'Unleash your sexual superpowers' position him as highly sexual. The model wears his shorts low on the waist, and stares down towards his torso and crotch with a facial expression that signifies contentment and implied power. The verb 'unleash' holds wider sexual connotations linked to male desire, with the penis taking the place of a furious animal about to be released from oppressive restraint.

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<sup>1</sup> *Men's Health*, May 2003, Front cover image. Photographed by Michele Asselin.



The myth of the penis as pertaining to masculinity and power is evident in this image: muscular, athletic men can unleash their sexual superpowers with confidence.

While the penis cannot be explicitly shown on the front cover of a mainstream heterosexual men's magazine, the suggestion that masculinity and status are linked with sexual performance is evident. Sexual virility (or rather, hypersexuality) and myths surrounding the large penis have traditionally been associated with black men, and so it is interesting to see a contrasting representation of white masculinity being defined both through 'the body' and through the possession of 'sexual superpowers'. Writing on the stereotyping of black men as hypersexual in Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* (with particular reference to the photograph 'Man in a Polyester Suit'), Kobena Mercer stated,

...black men are confined and defined in their 'being' as sexual and nothing but sexual, hence hypersexual. In *Man in a Polyester Suit*, apart from his hands, it is the penis and the penis alone that identifies the model in the photograph as a black man (Mercer:1993:310).

In Figure 6.1, the model is not defined by the image of his penis (as was the 'Man in a Polyester Suit'), but the penis is implied through his body. As Anne Potts has suggested, the penis connotes hardness, strength, activity and endurance, with male sexual experience being centred around the function of the penis (Potts:2000:89). *Mcn's Health* is a culture that values the qualities of hardness, strength, activity and endurance in the muscular male body as a whole (such qualities are not only present in Figure 6.1 above, but are consistently signified in visions of the athletic and the Herculean body). The white man in Figure 6.1 is

cast as sexual, with readers positioned at a point of narcissistic identification in ways that render them similarly defined through their bodies and sexuality.

Through magazines such as *Men's Health*, white men are re-claiming the body in ways that have traditionally been associated with black men. Narcissistic representations of white male bodies as sexualised objects present a challenge to taken-for-granted assumptions that the gaze does not objectify them.

The male cover model is not only gazing at his own image with a smile, but the white background and lighting take his body out of any real context and reveal it as a staged image. Whereas colour is often used to enhance the carnal and erotic nature of flesh in magazines such as *FHM*, the black and white greyscale photography of *Men's Health* produces a colder, loftier atmosphere that can be seen to create a distance between reader and image in classical terms, or as a figure for serious contemplation, comparison and identification. The use of grey scale photography is significant in Figure 6.1, as it serves to enhance the presence of the white body so that we are able to view every single inch of muscular definition (in bodybuilding competitions white men are known to bronze their bodies to enhance muscular definition that is otherwise more difficult to see). In his work on white masculinities, Richard Dyer suggests that the use of light in film and photography is a way to produce sexual desire for the body or face in the image, and the 'pure light of desirability' is frequently used to enhance the male gaze on women's faces/bodies (Dyer:1997:135). The model in Figure 6.1 is a body that stands in the light (we see the shadow cast by his face as he looks



downwards), with the light positioning his torso as the central focal point. The grey scale photography and the hard torso of the model in Figure 6.1 appears as classical, sculpted and as if cast in stone. The muscularly defined body of the model shown looks chiselled, his posture is stiff, and his skin is noticeably smooth and hairless. The model in Figure 6.1 can be seen to embody an athletic ideal of masculinity, and his defined torso is staged and shaped to show hard work and dedication.

The photograph in Figure 6.1 threatens notions of the male gaze insofar as the man invites us to look at his body and thus places himself in a potential position of objectification. Yet while the image in itself is homoerotic, the circular photograph of the woman above the model's head reinstates both the body and magazine as heterosexual; the athlete is an image of identification insofar as women are contemplating his body. The woman in the circular photograph is positioned with her head in her hands, and placed within the headline 'More sex, more often. Get it now'. This caption provides a link between the small photograph of the woman and the male cover model, suggesting that his masculine identity stimulates heterosexual desire. The photograph and caption require a reconsideration of the ways in which female bodies constitute masculine values. In feminist theories of the male gaze, women take on the role of sexual object, inviting a desiring gaze upon their bodies, and as Laura Mulvey states, 'according to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like' (Mulvey:1999:63). This quote from Laura

Mulvey was highlighted earlier in Chapter 2 where I noted its pertinence to my work in this thesis, particularly with regard to perceptions of idealized male bodies and reading relations. While Mulvey draws a distinction between the active male subject and passive female object in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in Figure 6.1 such roles are ostensibly reversed as the woman is photographed deep in thought and the narcissistic man is pictured partially naked as the main object in the frame. A further twist in terms of gender and representation is the fact that the photographer of the image, Michele Asselin, is a woman. Here we have role reversal of the man as the embodiment of an ideal and the woman photographer as the controller of the image, directing the gaze at the white, male model's body.

Yet there is also an implied activity in the male body on this cover, through both his posture and through the captions that surround him, and there is a tension created as to whether the cover model is the object or the subject of representation. On the one hand he invites a desiring gaze at his body, yet there is also action and control suggested in the front cover image and through captions that refer to sex, muscle and exercise. Figurative language and frontloaded verbs in phrases such as 'Burn Off the Belly!' and 'Pack on muscle anywhere and everywhere' suggest aggression, self-improvement and movement. The captions are crucial in this cover image, since they imply action and reinforce masculinity as being associated with strength, activity, and muscular definition. The gaze is directed by the desire to look at the model's body, and we even see the



narcissism of the model desiring his own body. However, the enhanced muscularity, surrounding photographs and suggestive captions help to fix the photograph as an image for identification or aspiration rather than as an object of sexual desire.

In contrast to *Men's Health*, the front covers of *FHM* always feature images of women who are well-known models/celebrities/stars, accompanied by prurient captions. The women who adorn the front covers of *FHM* are always sexually suggestive, reminiscent of tabloid style 'Page 3' or of soft-core pornographic models. While full nudity is never displayed, sex and erotic pleasure are always suggested through the selection (and absence) of clothes, the posture and facial expressions used, and the supporting captions on the cover. On the covers of *FHM* women signify male desire, and women's bodies in *FHM* are firmly placed as the object of the male gaze with the omnipotent male spectator controlling the image displayed.



Figure 6.2<sup>2</sup>



The model photographed in Figure 6.2 is the famous British celebrity and model Jordan (Katie Price). Jordan's breasts and crotch are positioned as the central focal points of the image, and are enhanced by her white bikini. The model's sexuality is thrust forward, and her separated legs are prominent above the caption 'Feel the Heat!' The photograph is overtly sexual and the model is objectified as an image of sexual desire. However, Jordan responds to her positioning as the object of the gaze, and her direct stare towards the viewer, as well as her overt sexual desire signifies a threat. In Chapter 7 I will develop this point to argue that the threatening gaze of women celebrities that are positioned as sexual objects can be read alongside the grotesque repertoires of *FHM*, rendering women as sexual freaks. The exaggerated stance and

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<sup>2</sup> *FHM*, August 2003: Front Cover. Photographed by Ricky Chicago.



postures of women models produces a hypersexuality that enhances objectification, but which also threatens to castrate through the models' willingness to take an active role in heterosexual male fantasy. The ways in which women are complicit with heterosexual fantasy is particularly stark in fantasy narratives, and is also shown through the willingness of celebrities to pose for lad's magazines such as *FHM* alongside the numbers of women who submit sexually provocative photographs to *FHM.com* for the viewing pleasure of online readers (this will be discussed further in Chapter 7). Women models stand in contrast to the lad as an image of beauty, yet their hypersexuality threatens the viewer in ways that position women as grotesque.

The female body is the most frequent image in *FHM* and sets the basis for the discussion of ideal standards of beauty through comparison of female models and celebrities, everyday women professionally photographed (as part of regular features such as 'On the Couch' and 'Student of the Month'), and amateur photographs sent to the magazine of everyday women (often competing for the title of 'high street honey'). Heterosexuality is the lynchpin of *FHM*, and women's bodies construct the boundaries of desire as the focus of the male gaze. The strong heterosexual overtones of *FHM* (visually constructed through (hyper)sexual women's bodies) create space for the more ambiguous representation of the male body in advertising and fashion features in a culture that otherwise holds a fear of the gay 'Other'. In men's lifestyle magazines, female and gay bodies and values emblemize and negotiate the positioning of white, male masculine values. In *FHM* the visual representation of idealized male bodies as

sexually desirable is negligible outside of consumer discourses, and, as I will discuss below, consumer frameworks provide legitimate space for complexities in the male gaze.

The distinctive attitudes towards the male body and heterosexual masculinity are apparent in the deconstruction of front cover images from *Men's Health* and *FHM*. I have unpacked the visual codes in Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2 in order to highlight the divergence of men's magazines in the eroticising regimes of men's bodies. In *Men's Health*, classical images of the male body are present through notions of the athlete/Adonis, and the grotesque is abjected ('Burn off the Belly'). In contrast, *FHM* rejects disciplined, classical images of the muscular male body through photographs of sexually objectified women (who simultaneously threaten readers in their hypersexual positioning). With the new style of men's magazines since the mid-late 1990s, there has been a shift in the complexity of imagined identities as they are constructed by magazine cultures, and this has been reflected through representations of the male body. In this thesis I examine such complexities in terms of the classical and the grotesque (and in Chapter 7 these terms are complicated in relation to the latent grotesque of *Men's Health* through images of bodybuilders). The shift and complexification of the male gaze has extended forms of hegemonic masculinities available in the imagined identities of men's lifestyle magazines, and I will now turn to the analysis of the male body as an indicator for how white men are positioned in the contexts of *Men's Health* and *FHM*.



# Typologies of White Masculinities: Adonis, Hercules and the Athlete

## Classical Bodies and White Masculinity

Academic writing on the male body as an image of beauty frequently cites two specific body shapes as representing idealized figures in western societies: the slender, lightly muscular man and the more muscularly defined, bulkier man. Such distinctions have been termed as the 'Adonis' and 'Hercules' or the 'Ephebe' and 'Blond God' in an effort to build conceptual distinctions between beautiful men and muscular men (Pope, Phillips and Olivardia:2002, Stratton, 1996). As a body of youth and beauty, Adonis embodies a smooth, lightly muscular body that contrasts with the maturity and brute strength of the Herculean image of 'manhood'. The figures of Adonis and Hercules represent contrasts in the dominant characteristics of beauty and bulk. In this chapter I extend the idealized male body into three main 'types': the figures of Adonis, Hercules and the athlete. I have introduced the athlete as a bridge between Adonis and Hercules, and as the primary idealized figure that appears in *Men's Health* magazine. The athlete is a body that displays a balance that is constructed and positioned between idealizations of Adonis and Hercules. In *Men's Health*, athletic bodies are presented as beautiful, strong and muscular, with added prowess in terms of physical endurance. The athlete is an image of the classical body, and Kenneth Dutton claims that the shift to viewing the athlete as '...remarkable for his physical beauty and bodily strength' in classical Greek culture was attached to the rise of the gymnasium as an athletic training ground for young men (Dutton:1995:35). While *Men's Health* is not comparable to classical Greek and Roman cultures of athleticism, what the magazine has achieved is

the production of the athlete as an image of idealized white masculinity that is built around gym cultures for popular media audiences.

Classical bodies are relevant to a reading of men's magazines on a number of levels. Firstly, while there are not just three 'types' of idealized male body presented in the visual framework of men's lifestyle magazines, the figures of Adonis, the athlete and Hercules allow for broad conceptual distinctions with respect to the balance of beauty and bulk. The allusions to classical images build the muscular male body through conceptions of whiteness. Yet this connection is not straightforward as visions of the athlete as an embodiment of black masculinity are popular cultural stereotypes that have positioned black men as being 'of the body'. Discussing Robert Mapplethorpe's photography of naked black male bodies, Kobena Mercer stated,

As Phillip pretends to throw a shot-put the idealized physique of a Greek statue is superimposed on that most commonplace of media stereotypes of the black male as athlete and sportsman, endowed with a 'natural' muscular physique with a capacity for strength, grace and machine-like perfection (Mercer:1986:65).

In Mapplethorpe's photography, black men were photographed in classical terms, positioned as almost abstracted sculptures and poised as athletes that were objectified through both homoerotic and colonial gazes. While I will not provide a comparison between Mapplethorpe's photography and the visual imagery used in *Men's Health*, what I am noting is the point of comparison and overlap between white male bodies and black male bodies as raised by Kobena Mercer in his study of Mapplethorpe.

Many writers have discussed the ways that black masculinities have been tied to perceptions of black bodies as physical, hyper-masculine, animalistic and violent



(Staples:1982, Rutherford:1988, Mercer and Julien:1988). As Jonathan Rutherford states,

The white man allows the black man one thing, his body. But it is a body filled with white fantasy and foreboding [...] He becomes the constructed image of white men's repressed lust; imbued with an animal-like sexuality and a huge penis, a body closer to nature than the 'cultured white man' (Rutherford:1988:63).

In *Men's Health* we see a vision of masculinity bound within concepts of whiteness and hegemony, yet which also uses visual imagery that has traditionally been viewed as the domain of black men. In this context, white men have reclaimed the body as a physical embodiment of power in terms associated with perceptions of 'manhood'. In the positioning of white bodies as athletic or Herculean the body signifies control and mastery, providing white masculinity with a privileged point of identification that is built around the re-claimed muscular male body. However, as I will discuss below, the classical ideal of the muscular male body is not an easy ideal for contemporary men to strive towards, and dialogues on *menshealth.co.uk* frequently raise areas of insecurity on notions of the idealized male body as well as anxieties over non-visible aspects of such bodies such as the penis. I will now turn towards the problematic figure of the Adonis as an image that feminises the male body as an object of beauty and homoerotic desire.

### Advertising Adonis

In *FHM* and *Men's Health*, advertisements represent key spaces for the display of male beauty and idealised physiques. The discourses of fitness and exercise that are central to *Men's Health* allow even wider scope for representation of the male body as

an object of desire and/or identification. Frameworks of consumption are an integral aspect of men's lifestyle magazines, and advertisements and fashion/grooming editorials represent key spaces where male flesh can be represented as desirable for heterosexual male readers. Yet despite this presence, heterosexuality clearly stands as the norm (as shown by representations of women and discussions of sexual desire inside the magazines). Heterosexuality is foundational to both *FHM* and *Men's Health*, and despite the tensions generated by images that are implicitly or explicitly homoerotic, the heterosexual desire of women forms the context of representation. I will now analyse two homoerotic advertisements that eroticize the white, male body, and aim to understand how magazines such as *FHM* and *Men's Health* accommodate homoerotic desire in cultures that are produced as heterosexual communities.

Since the late 1970s feminists such as Judith Williamson, Janice Winship and Rosemary Betterton have highlighted how advertising has used women's bodies as objects of sexual titillation, reinforcing the view that women's roles are inevitably caught up with a passive sexual objectification (Williamson:1978, Winship:1981, Betterton:1987). Although women today continue to be sexually objectified in advertising and the media (the briefest glance at *FHM* will demonstrate this), many writers have examined the sexualized male body and homoerotic representation in men's magazines, advertising and fashion since the 1980s. The representation of the male body as desirable has continued throughout the 1990s and into the millennium, and it can be suggested that over this period, the media and advertising industries have



become more daring in their display of the male body as erotic to a mainstream heterosexual audience. Indeed, Susan Bordo stated that it was not until 1995 when she had her

... first taste of what it [was] really like to inhabit this visual culture as a man. It was both thrilling and disconcerting. It was the first time in my experience that I had encountered a commercial representation of the male body that seemed to deliberately invite me to linger over it (Bordo:1999:68).

Writers such as Sut Jhally and Jon Stratton have suggested that contemporary western cultures provide a framework whereby the commodity itself justifies objectification (Jhally:1995, Stratton:1996). Jhally stated that, 'the end result is that the commodity is part of an increasingly eroticized world - that we live in a culture that is more and more defined erotically through commodities' (Jhally:1995:82). The frames of consumerism create a sexually threatening display of the male body, yet structurally advertisements are set back from the editorial content of the magazine. Advertisements are spaces that can cause disruption with the editorial content, and in lads' magazines such as *FHM* there are many explicit homoerotic images that stand outside the wider cultural framework. Advertisements possess the potential to threaten heterosexual masculinities, yet the competing negotiations of heterosexism and homoeroticism can be seen to combine, hold in tension and privilege a consuming (yet ambiguous) heterosexuality. I now turn to deconstruct two images of the beautiful male body to complicate theories of the male gaze through the positioning of men as passive objects for the heterosexual male consumer/spectator.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The advertisements that are deconstructed below were both used to advertise male fragrances in *FHM* and *Men's Health* during 2002.



There are many advertisements printed in men's lifestyle magazines that position idealised male bodies in ways that can be read as ambiguous in terms of desire and identification. For example, if we look at the advertisement for the Davidoff fragrance 'Cool Water' for men we can see an example of ways in which the male body challenges notions of the male gaze.

Figure 6.3 <sup>4</sup>



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<sup>4</sup> Advertisement for Davidoff 'Cool Water'. *Men's Health*, June 2002: 56-7. Photographed by Tyen for Davidoff. This advertisement also ran in *FHM* during the same year.



In a two-page spread we can see the image of a man lying back in water with his eyes closed. In the foreground there is a bottle of the fragrance being sold, and the blue tones that surround the body can be seen to signify both masculinity (through association with baby boys), and femininity (through the water imagery). The model in the image lies back passively (his neck is open and extended), and although the detail of the photograph in Figure 6.3 is limited in the reproduction shown above (this advertisement has been reduced in size and was originally a two-page spread), the man has goose bumps on his chest, indicating both the coldness and also the vulnerability of the body. The image is castrated, as water swirls around the model's groin, obstructing the view of his penis and making it appear almost vaginal. In this image, the male body is feminized and is positioned as an object of beauty: the body is young, toned, smooth and bronzed. An alternative reading could see the body as unconscious and in danger of drowning or even dead, however the vivid use of colour and the feminized beauty of the male body are both more evocative of a fairytale. There is a website address placed in the corner of the advertisement, on which the photographer of this piece, Tyen, stated that

When it came to shooting the new visual for Davidoff cool water, in my mind's eye there was a picture of the original campaign, that marvelous image of the man lying in the sea. But the man had been asleep for too long, like the Sleeping Beauty. Of course, in the fairytale, it is the prince who awakens the princess with a kiss. The Davidoff Cool Water man is awakened by the kiss of nature, the caress of the wind and the waves. The movement of the ocean is like a heartbeat, the first stirrings of a passion – a love affair between man and water (Tyen, 'The Davidoff Cool Water Man', accessed 07.07.02).

The invocation of fairytales can be seen to attach an image of whiteness to the photograph in Figure 6.3. In particular, symbols of purity are built around the white male body: young, innocent and cleansed by the natural rhythms of the sea. However,



the image confuses the status of the muscular male body, as on the one hand there is a man with a toned, hard and muscular physique that is reminiscent of a bronzed Adonian god, yet he is simultaneously castrated in his femininity, by the fairytale genre, and by the imagery of water gushing over his body.

A further example of erotic positioning of the male body that I will discuss is the advertisement for Yves Saint Laurent (YSL) fragrance 'M7' below in Figure 6.4.

Figure 6.4 <sup>5</sup>



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<sup>5</sup> YSL advertisement for male fragrance M7. *Men's Health*, July 2004: 67. Photographed by Solvø Sunsbø for YSL. This advertisement also ran in *FHM* during the same year.



In Figure 6.4 we have a naked man, reclined and looking directly at the camera. His arms are placed above his head, and he has goose bumps visible on his chest. The model in Figure 6.4 is placed in an apparently passive posture, similar to the Davidoff 'Cool Water' man in Figure 6.3, with the positioning of the arms above the model's head indicating openness and relaxation. Yet despite the passive positioning of the models, there are notable differences between Figure 6.3 and Figure 6.4. Firstly, the advertisement in Figure 6.4 self-consciously positions itself as an image of the classical body, with the grey scale photography and muscular body enhancing the classical colour and tone of the photograph. Despite the notable body hair of the model (a sign of mature masculinity) the classical image is reinforced by the image of the scent bottle in the foreground, a bottle that is 'shaped like a plain monolith accentuated by a narrow strip of silver metal, the Eau de Toilette bottle illustrates a modern and masculine elegance' ([www.ysl-m7.com](http://www.ysl-m7.com), accessed 01.07.04). The monolith-style bottle enhances the masculine, classical image being portrayed by the photographer for YSL. Classical art, sculpture and mythology are valuable resources to portray the male body as both homoerotic and masculine, and are methods of representation frequently utilized in *Men's Health* magazine in order to amalgamate both body and mind into the athletic vision of masculinity. Earlier I discussed how black men have often been stereotyped as athletic in the popular media in ways that Kobena Mercer has described as having 'all brawn and no brains' (Mercer:1986:65). In Figure 6.4 however, the white model is pensive and thoughtful (in numerology the number 7 is associated with the mind and thought), as being of the mind despite his solid and muscular body: he is in a state of balance between mind and body. The masculine, classical references in this

advertisement assist in the accommodation of homoerotic desires by counteracting the passive, femininized positioning of a topless white male model in a reclining posture.

The absence of the penis is significant in both advertisements, and its invisibility can be seen to aid heterosexual stability in the context of men's magazines that target heterosexual male consumers. A parallel advertisement was run by YSL for 'M7' featuring the same model shown in Figure 6.4, where he was sat reclined in a full body pose that clearly displayed the model's flaccid penis. The uncut advertisement for M7 that displayed the penis caused widespread controversy, and journalist for *The Observer* Amelia Hill stated that,

Last week's ad [for YSL 'M7'] was the most sexually explicit advertisement to ever appear in a mainstream magazine - even prompting some media observers to label perfume as the new pornography. The black and white advert has infuriated the Catholic church and French family groups, who have demanded that it be censored and banned. British magazines have refused to carry the ad (Hill, *Excess*, accessed 03.11.02).

The penis is clearly important to conceptions of masculinity, and in the context of advertisements, where the male body can be viewed as erotic, there are clear threats to heterosexual stability since the unpredictability of the penis (in terms of movement and erotic desire) is a permanent threat to the vision of the male body as sexually erotic. In *FHM* and *Men's Health*, advertisements for men's toiletries and fragrances frequently feature partially or fully naked male bodies. The penis can be suggested as a presence, but is always obscured from the gaze of readers (unless it is portrayed as grotesque in the context of *FHM*). While white men are eroticized, the invisibility of the penis prevents a direct visual threat to heterosexuality. I have used the particular example of



fragrance advertisements in this thesis to highlight the tensions caused with respect to the beautiful male body, the male gaze and heterosexual male readers. Advertisements for scents are often at the forefront of challenges to the eroticized white male body as they frequently use flesh to sell fragrance to predominantly western consumers. I will now discuss the implications of erotic male bodies for the positioning of heterosexual male spectators in *FHM* and *Men's Health*.

The beautiful, Adonian, male body as the focal point of the gaze creates tensions with the active/male and passive/female dualisms invoked by feminists such as Laura Mulvey in her essay on *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey:1999). In the above advertisements the beautiful male body is positioned as desirable, and oscillates between being viewed as passive (as with the Adonis), and as active through muscular definition, stature and implied activity (through athletic bodies or Herculean images). The images in Figures 6.3 and 6.4 position the eroticized models as objects of the gaze in ways that require a focus upon the bare naked flesh to sell images of sensuality. In particular, Figure 6.3 stands problematically in terms of the male gaze, since the model's body freezes the flow of action by absorbing the look of the gaze and, being passively positioned, with his eyes closed, the model is placed in a context where it can be imagined that he needs saving (from the threat of drowning). To use a phrase coined by Mulvey, the male body can connote 'to-be-looked-at-ness', and this is evident in the ways that advertisers target heterosexual male consumers through erotic male bodies (Mulvey:1999:63). In Figures 6.3 and 6.4, there are no women to stabilize the

homoerotic threat and so discourses of consumption become significant in framing the threat of objectification with narcissistic identification. While the beautiful male body can be displayed as an erotic object, it is not displayed as spectacle in the way that women's bodies are portrayed in men's lifestyle magazines. Indeed, the representation of women in the surrounding context as erotic objects of sexual desire helps to repress the homoeroticism of advertising, and adds to the heterosexual framework through discourses of sex and mutual sexual attraction.

In his essay *Masculinity as Spectacle*, Steve Neale claimed that, 'as it is, male homosexuality is constantly present as an undercurrent, as a potentially troubling aspect of many films and genres, but one that is dealt with obliquely, symptomatically, and that has to be repressed' (Neale:1983:15). *FHM* and *Men's Health* are both consumer products targeted towards heterosexual men, and although *Men's Health* does also have a gay readership (as indicated in my research in Chapter 8), homoerotic tensions need to be displaced. Heterosexual male-identified personae on *menshealth.co.uk* have revealed awareness of the ambiguous codes in images of the beautiful male body (see Chapter 8), noting their discomfort with the homoerotic undertones of the near naked muscular male bodies of cover models. In *FHM*, hyperbolic and 'ironic' speech genres uphold homophobia, and looking at '*FHM's* Gay Test' we can see how the fear of the gay 'Other' is verbalized as a source of 'ironic' humour. *FHM* stated,

It's every right-thinking man's greatest fear: that he may, over time, at some point...touch another man's pee-pee. Yes indeed: like effete, pink lightning, gayness can strike at any time - and at any one of us (*FHM*, January 2003: 48).



While idealized male bodies and images of male beauty can be said to destabilize the male gaze (particularly in images that display the Adonis as an image of beauty), the use of muscular male bodies implies activity and strength, and set in the wider context of the magazine cultures, the homoerotic connotations are overthrown in the enhanced objectification of women's bodies (including the grotesque). The wider contexts of both magazines promote heterosexuality through the use of photographs and features on women and sex that function to uphold heterosexual stability.

Gay culture has had a huge impact on advertising and fashion, not least because of the presence of gay stylists and photographers influencing modes of representation. There are advertisements that appear in *Men's Health* and *FHM* that hold explicit links with gay culture and that justify examination as examples of ways in which men's lifestyle magazines accommodate homoerotic desire. Figure 6.5 (shown on the next page) features an advertisement that circulated in both *FHM* and *Men's Health* for Jean Paul Gautier's fragrance 'Le Male'.



Figure 6.5<sup>6</sup>



The advertisement in Figure 6.5 is openly gay, using campness (signified by the limp wrist and pout of the model) and the image of the sailor as a stereotypical figure of gay sexual fantasy. The tight, striped t-shirt, sailor cap, earring and heart tattoo that the model wears all openly point towards his gay sexuality. Furthermore, the soft gaze, plump pout and large, red heart tattoo on the model's arm all assist in a feminizing of the image that subverts traditional images of the gay sailor icon as drawn by illustrators

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Paul Gaultier advertisement for the male fragrance 'Le Male'. *FHM*, January 2002: 39. Photographed by Jean-Baptiste Mondino for Gaultier. This advertisement also ran in *Men's Health* during the same year.



such as Tom of Finland, or by photographers such as Steven Zeeland, where gay sailors are used as images of macho masculinities.<sup>7</sup> The use of the gay sailor stereotype in Figure 6.5 plays on parody, as the model is dressed almost as if he were to take part in a theatrical performance, carnival or a themed party. As an exaggerated image of camp, the image is not directly threatening to the heterosexual context it is placed within. Camp can be seen as the populist side of gay culture that is not viewed as threatening by a mainstream heterosexual audiences, and there are many examples of camp gay comedians, television presenters and actors who are very popular with British consumer audiences (such as Graham Norton, Paul O'Grady or Dale Winton). Audiences are not invited to look at the model in Figure 6.5 sexually, but rather, stylistically; the image is sexually castrated (the eroticism of the male body is denied), and the photograph reminiscent of a theatrical performance that parodies the gay sailor icon. While the advertisement in Figure 6.5 challenges heterosexual readers as an overt gay presence (standing out from the display of women and muscular male bodies in *FHM* and *Men's Health* respectively), it does not present a significant challenge to the heterosexual stability of male readers.

### Torsos and Six-Packs

The white male torso is the most common front cover and promotional image of *Men's Health* magazine, and can be viewed as the primary space to visually portray

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<sup>7</sup> Tom of Finland is an illustrated character conceived by Touko Laaksonen who featured in sexually explicit, gay erotic art of a muscular man in a variety of uniforms (including sailor uniforms). Steven Zeeland is a photographer who takes erotic photographs of gay sailors. See [www.stevenzeeland.com](http://www.stevenzeeland.com) for examples of his work.

hegemonic masculine ideals of strength and power. In contrast, the muscular, pumped male torso appears less frequently in *FHM* unless shown in advertising or through sporting heroes or movie stars where the torso might be shown to represent the 'hardness' of the character. The construction of the lad is not dependent upon the image of muscular masculinity in the same way as the *Men's Health* man, and the undisciplined lad eludes direct representation of the male body. In *Men's Health*, the muscular, 'pumped' male body is an image of discipline and hardness, and it is seen to literally embody 'manhood'. The lad (conveniently named to present an image of youth and/or immaturity) is defined by the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, and the body is placed secondary to styles of behaviour and the ability to be corrupted. I will therefore continue to discuss images of the torso and the six-pack as they relate to the culture of *Men's Health*, although I will draw levels of comparison between both magazine titles in the representation of idealized male bodies.

Inserted on the next page are two examples of *Men's Health* promotional leaflets where the torso is used to represent masculinity even where other body parts, including the face, are absent.



Figure 6.6

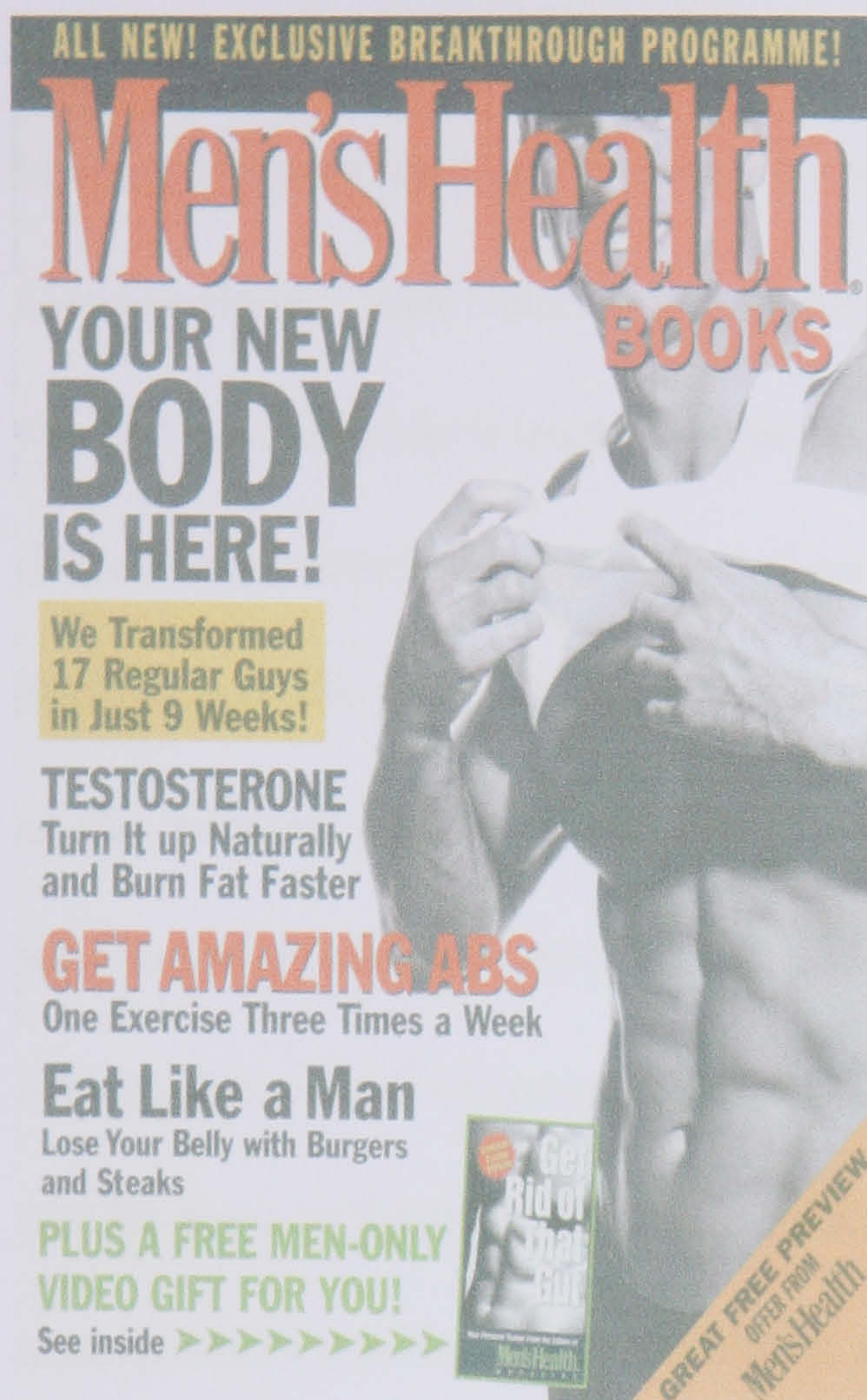
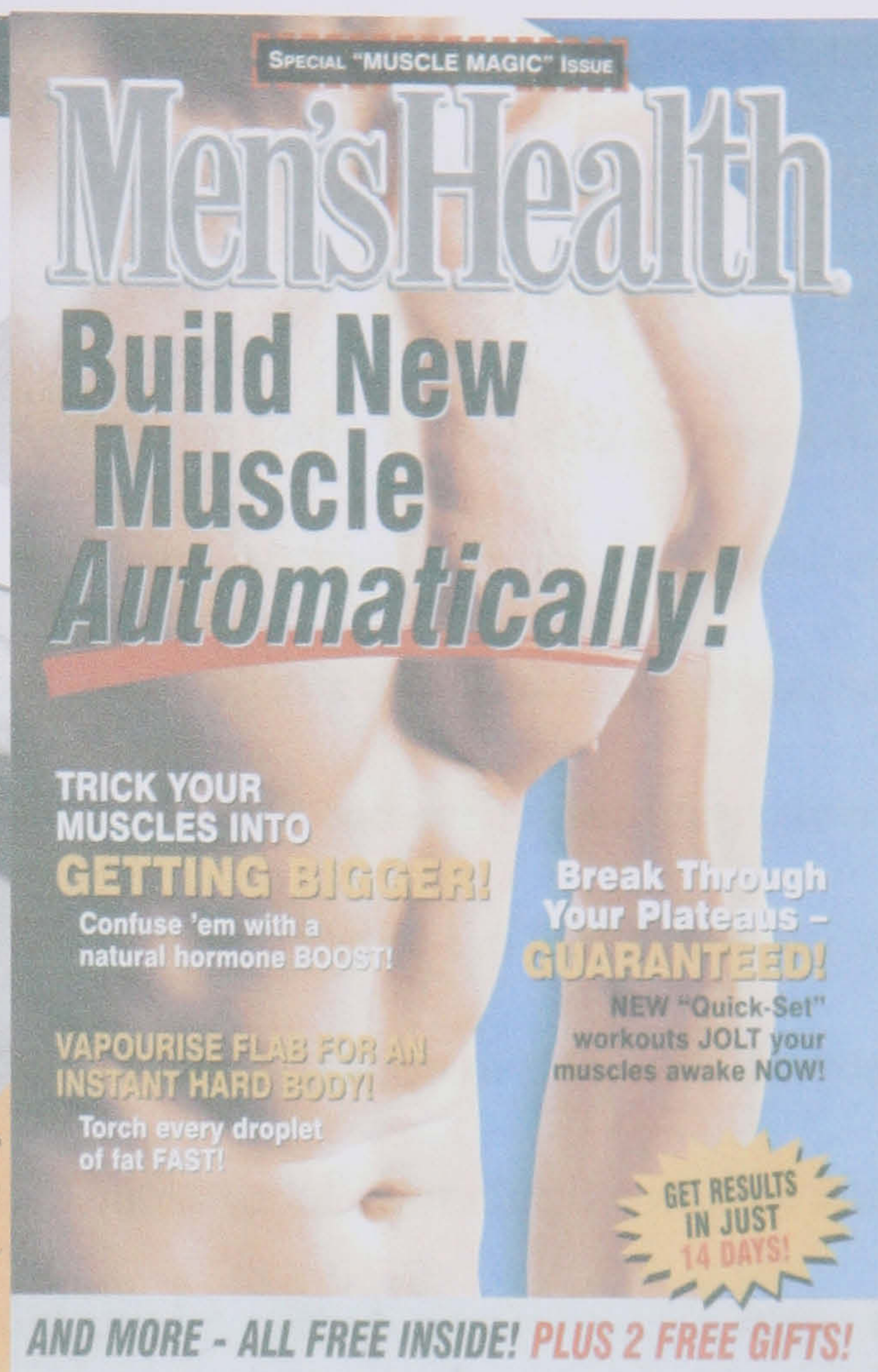


Figure 6.7<sup>8</sup>



The two leaflets shown above were in circulation during 2003 and 2004 to promote *Men's Health* brand extension products. The leaflet in Figure 6.6 was used to promote the *Men's Health* book *The Testosterone Advantage Plan: A 9-Week Food and Fitness Breakthrough for Men Only*, and offered the free gift of a video called *Get Rid of That Gut*. The leaflet in Figure 6.7 similarly promotes a *Men's Health* book called *The Hard Body Plan: The Ultimate 12-Week Program for Burning Fat and Building Muscle*. In both of these leaflets, the importance of the chest and abdominal muscles are highlighted as spaces of power, where 'regular guys' can be 'transformed' into visibly muscular men if they turn up their 'natural' testosterone levels. The language

<sup>8</sup> Figure 6.6 and Figure 6.7 were promotional leaflets produced by *Men's Health* magazine and circulated as inserts during 2003-2004.



used in both of the promotional leaflets sells the fantasy of the perfect body to readers by using relatively short time frames, combined with images of exaggerated muscular bodies. Phrases such as 'Build new muscle automatically', 'Trick your Muscles into Getting Bigger' and 'Get Amazing Abs: One Exercise Three Times a Week' promote the process of body transformation as something that can be easily consumed, (this despite the contrasting presence of torsos clearly attained through hard work and dedication). In *Men's Health*, it is usual to establish a time frame for the achievement of the 'perfect' physique that is set in days or weeks, and even where days turn into weeks and weeks turn into months. The images in Figure 6.6 and Figure 6.7 represent a Herculean ideal of muscular bulk, and the fragmentation of the muscular male body can be seen to fetishize the male torso. The image of Hercules is complex and is ambiguously positioned as idealized, as it can be seen to signify massive bulk, brute strength and mature masculinity, with wider connotations of manual labour or the 'strong man' (including the myth of the labours of Hercules). The Herculean figure can be seen to stand on the periphery of the idealized body in *FHM* and *Men's Health*, as it is 'pumped' and physically powerful, embodying a powerful masculine aesthetic that is prone to visions of hyper-masculinity through the image of the bodybuilder (as will be discussed in Chapter 7). In *Visual Pleasure*, Mulvey stated that '...fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself' (Mulvey:1999:65). In Figure 6.6 and Figure 6.7, the male torso is turned into an object of desire through direct focus, yet muscularity of the image also resists objectification in its associations with hardness. Motivational captions and language such as 'we transformed 17 regular guys in just 9 weeks' and that one can



‘get results in just fourteen days’ implies activity, and the bodies that we see are carefully planned. The use of ‘9 weeks’ and ‘fourteen days’ rather than two months or two weeks makes the timescale of achievement more catching to readers, making targets seem more easily achievable.

Inside the promotional leaflet in Figure 6.7, *Men’s Health* fitness director Lou Schuler states, ‘Dear Friend, Do you sometimes feel bad about yourself, and ashamed of your body? Do you wish you could change it for a leaner, fitter version? Then it’s time to take control’. The language used in these headlines and captions reflects motivational techniques used widely in the fitness and exercise industry, with the singular ‘Dear Friend’ personalising the message to the reader. However, while motivational language recurrently speaks on behalf of the magazine, the inadequacy of those who fall short is present on the message boards of *menshealth.co.uk* where men often display feelings of inadequacy in terms of failing to embody the Herculean or athletic muscular ideal. *Men’s Health* is a complex environment that both upholds the image of idealized bodies as points of motivation and aspiration, yet provides support for those who do not live up to such idealized standards (online communities as sources of support for men are discussed in Chapter 8). That said, message board solutions offered to readers who suffer insecurities that are related to body image usually reflects the need to take control, with advice coated in discourses of self-improvement and discipline, rather than rejecting the physical ideals set by the broader magazine culture. As we shall see in Chapter 7, in the process of building the muscular ideal, fat is an

undesirable force that exists as an unnecessary boundary between men and the literal embodiment of masculinity and ‘manhood’. The torso is a highly visible space to show one’s hardness (in the gym or the shower room), and the techniques employed by *Men’s Health* highlight the masculinity of the project through words such as ‘testosterone’ and ‘for Men Only’ (see Figure 6.7).

Advice on how to obtain a six-pack abdomen is frequently covered in *Men’s Health*, and evidence from reader narratives on *menshealth.co.uk* suggests that a great amount of sustained hard work is needed in order to progress towards achieving this goal. The six-pack is the one of the ultimate achievements for men on *menshealth.co.uk* who engage in weights training and gym culture. The six-pack is a highly masculine image, and the lines of the six-pack construct disciplined and hard bodies. The production of a six-pack has taken on mythical dimensions on *menshealth.co.uk*, with online participants providing their own detailed advice on how to achieve the almost unattainable six-pack. For example, on one very popular thread on *menshealth.co.uk* called ‘Want to get a six-pack. But how?’ readers offered a variety of detailed exercise and dietary regimes to aid one another with the goal of abdominal ‘perfection’. One participant suggested that,

The secret is to combine a low fat diet with a variety of different exercises. You should aim for around 50-60g of fat per day. This amount should give your body the fat it needs, but won’t provide it with the fat that hides your abs. Try 3 sets of 25rep crunches. Then try the V-Up same reps/sets as crunches. Then hold a weight plate around 5-10kg depending on your strength in front of you with your arms out straight. Then slowly turn the plate to the left, (trying to twist your waist as less as possible) and then to the right and then back to the centre. Repeat this 8-10 times and try 3 sets. Your body will not respond if you do the same exercises all the time,



so doing just crunches for example will not be as beneficial. By doing these three (and there are more) three times a week you are adding variety which will help your abs come out and look mean!! Also another tip don't stick to the same order, or your body will predict. I've been doing this for around 8 months, and it's working so I hope this helps you as well (*menshealth.co.uk*, 'Want to get a six-pack. But how?', accessed 10.03.04).

The image of the six-pack is set as an ideal standard for the male body and the embodiment of masculinity in the culture of *Men's Health*. The six-pack is an intense visual signifier for strength, power, control and dedication, qualities that are associated with hegemonic notions of masculinity in the cultural environment. Yet this standard is difficult to achieve, requiring a great deal of time, discipline and knowledge (official and 'secret') as shown in the reader response above. In the above message board post, the participant's knowing use of technical language and precise measurements sets up an authoritative voice that is linked to the progress made and experience gained during eight months working towards ownership of a six-pack.

The hard, muscular six-pack stands in contrast to feminised images of the body and men often talk about excess chest fat as 'tits' in ways that invoke women's bodies as a point of comparison for their failure to live up to standards of the idealized body. The associations made between weakness, being skinny and femininity are common amongst readers of *menshealth.co.uk*, and men often feel that they lack masculinity as a result of their build. Being skinny is undesirable in the eyes of *Men's Health*, and articles such as 'The Skinny Guy's Bulk Up Plan' or message board threads such as 'Skinny Man's Bulk-Up Challenge!!!' are regular features that provide tips on diet and exercise tips for men who want to bulk up their body as an embodiment of masculinity.

The six-pack torso does not feature so highly in the context of *FHM*, where lad culture is defined through regressive behaviour, the corruption of the body and the consumption of women. However, even in *FHM*, the muscular male torso (especially one that holds a six pack) is still set as a standard of the ideal male body in advertising, fashion and features on sporting, music and movie stars. In *Men's Health* the perfect male body represents strength through fitness, discipline and dedication, however such ideal standards also bring into question the potential for latent body obsession.

In *The Adonis Complex*, Harrison Pope, Katherine Phillips and Roberto Olivardia trace the rise of muscle dysmorphia (the perception that the body is smaller and less muscular than it is in reality) and male body obsession amongst men in the USA (Pope, Phillips and Olivardia:2002). The notion of the Adonis complex does not distinguish one body type as the ideal norm, but instead traces the psychological concerns of men with regard to body image and secret body obsession (Pope, Phillips and Olivardia:2002:6-7). Nevertheless, what becomes apparent in *The Adonis Complex* is the preoccupation with excessively muscular bodies by men who are committed (and often addicted) to gym culture. Pope, Phillips and Olivardia outline some of the common attributes of body obsession as the fear of fat, male breasts and the appearance of genitals (Pope, Phillips and Olivardia:2000). These concerns are also visible from a reading of the message boards on *menshealth.co.uk*, and the anxieties expressed can be read as a result of the gaze upon men's bodies in ways that place increasing demands on the embodiment of beauty, bulk and 'manliness'. The



fragmentation of the inner and outer body that is demonstrated by magazines such as *Men's Health* can be seen to encourage an obsessive interest in the body as an image to be analysed, controlled and sculpted. I will continue along this line of thought with respect to the regimes of disciplining planned bodies through scrutinising tactics. However, I will first move on to the discussion of how white men have reclaimed the body as an image of masculinity in *Men's Health* magazine.

In the above analysis of bodies that display beauty and muscular bulk, I have outlined a vision that is primarily presented and negotiated on white terms. Although *Men's Health* and *FHM* are not exclusively white texts (they do have black bodies in the visual framework, and there is evidence of black male readers online at [menshealth.co.uk](http://menshealth.co.uk)), the majority of bodies are white, and the construction of the Adonian, athletic and Herculean body is sculpted upon white men who are visually displayed and objectified. In presenting the body as central to white masculinity, white men are challenging the traditional mind/body binaries and reclaiming the physical body as an embodiment of power and as a visual signifier of notions of 'hard' masculinity. I will now move to a consideration of the ways in which idealized bodies are promoted through disciplinary regimes, and the implications of scrutinising the male body for readers. Sculpted, disciplined bodies are only achieved through dedicated hard work, and although the project of the idealized male body is presented as a pursuit of leisure for readers of *Men's Health*, the intricate fragmentation of the body requires lifestyle changes that affect both inner and outer bodies.

# Scrutinising Men's Bodies

## Fragmentation and Measurement

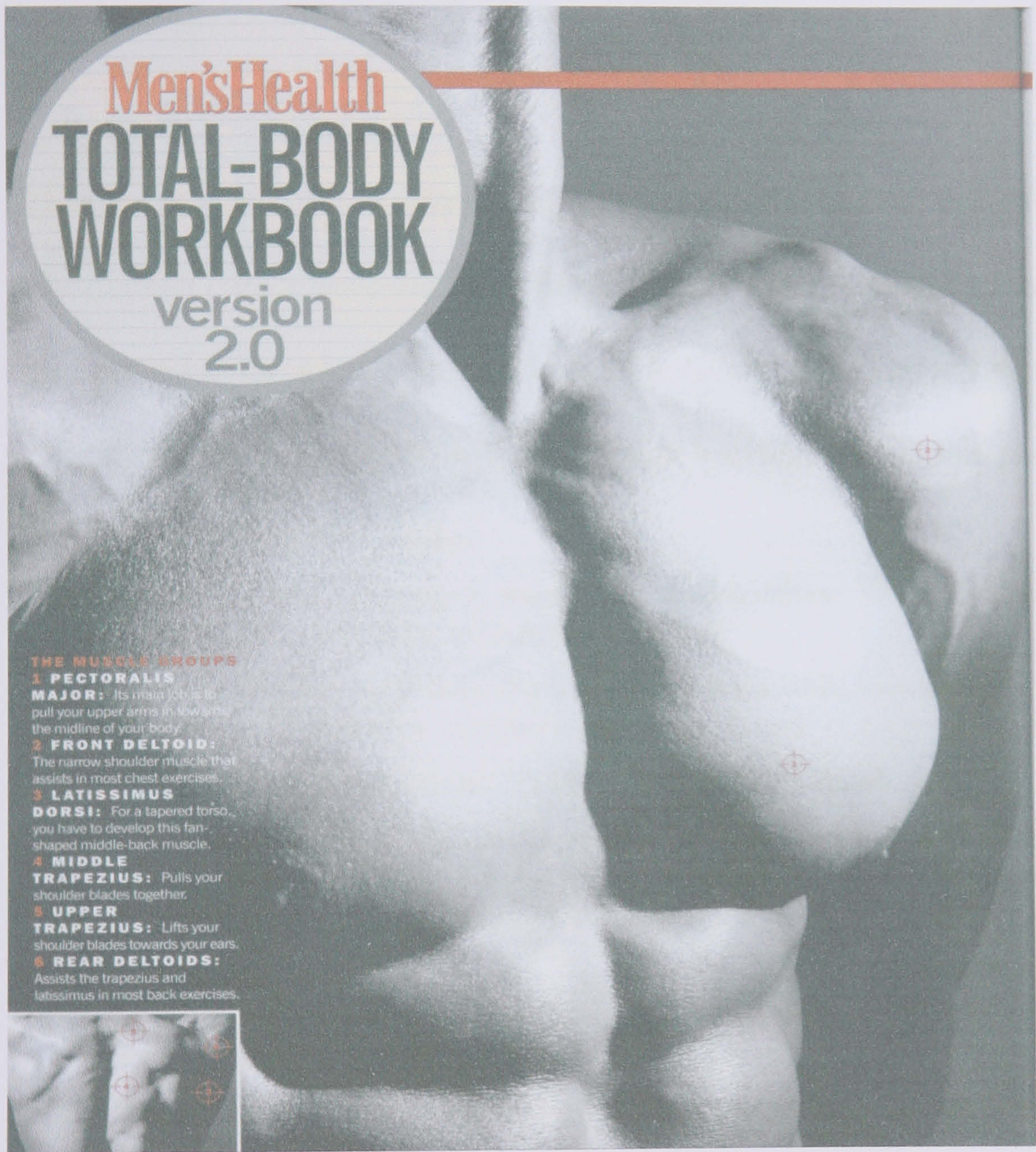
The male body is the primary focus of *Men's Health*, and as such it is placed under intense scrutiny. In his discussion of disciplinary power and medical photography, David Green claimed that, 'subject to the gaze of the camera, the body became the object of the closest scrutiny, its surface continually examined for the signs of its innate physical, mental and moral inferiority' (Green:1997:128). The difference between the medical photography outlined by Green and the representation of the body in *Men's Health* is that in the latter, readers are scrutinising the body of male models for signs of physical superiority. The inferior body lies with the reader (as we shall see in Chapter 8) who is set upon a regime of self-improvement. In Figure 6.6 and Figure 6.7 I displayed images that placed the male body under scrutiny as an image of desire/identification. However, photography is not the only way in which the male body is subjected to the scrutiny of the disciplinary gaze, and as I will discuss below, both magazine articles and online narratives promote disciplinary regimes that reinforce the subjection of the male body to intense forms of scrutiny.

Each month *Men's Health* focuses on specific parts of the body and the muscle groups to be worked upon (for example, this might concern weight lifting for arms or legs, or exercises to be performed for a six-pack abdomen). The focus on particular muscle groups invites readers to perform specific exercises to encourage the muscle growth of the respective areas being covered, offering different levels of intensity depending upon



the prior physical fitness of the reader. For example, in ‘The *Men’s Health* Total-Body Workout’ published in *Men’s Health* Jul/Aug 2002, we are presented with an enlarged image of the chest and a smaller image of the back, both containing pinpoint detail of where muscles groups are located.

Figure 6.8<sup>9</sup>



Alongside these images there are detailed, recommended exercises that continue throughout the article. The image of the male body is rock hard, and the solidness of the body is enhanced through the use of black and white photography (with reflections

<sup>9</sup> The image in Figure 6.8 was featured in *Men’s Health*, Jul/Aug 2002: 164. Photographers were Richard Corman and Beth Bischoff.



of light and shadow defining muscular lines). Bio-scientific discourses are drawn upon in the article to add authority to the advice given, as well as to distinguish between readers as ‘beginners’, ‘intermediate’ or ‘advanced’. Placed within the context of the complete ten-part series on ‘How to Build the Body you Want’, the article encourages analysis of fragmented physical details of the body (*Men’s Health*, Jul/Aug 2002).

A further example of how *Men’s Health* scrutinises the body in detail for signs of imperfection comes from the following advice on ‘Tricks to Gain a Hard Body’, which was featured in the *Men’s Health Total Body Guide*. This article suggested that readers could incorporate the following advice into their weight loss plan.

### **1. Pretend You’re a Tailor**

Measure everything – your neck, waist, arms, thighs, calves. Write it all down and put it somewhere you’ll have to look at it everyday.

**Your goal:** Maintain or reduce the size of your waist while increasing the size of everything else. Repeat your measurements every month.

### **2. To Change Your Weight, Follow the 15/500 Rule**

Changing your diet – radically starving yourself to lose weight or stuffing yourself to gain weight – is futile. If you’re trying to lose weight, you’ll slow your metabolism to a crawl. If you’re trying to gain, the excess calories will produce a lot of fat Here’s a better strategy.

**To Lose Weight:** Cut your daily food intake by a maximum of 15% or 500 calories, whichever is less.

**To Gain Weight:** Increase your daily intake by a maximum of 15% or 500 calories, whichever is less.

### **3. Take Notes**

We’ve been hitting you with a lot of maths here – 500 calories of this, 0.82g of that. All of this is meaningless unless you know exactly how much you actually consume.

(*Men’s Health Total Body Guide*, 2003: 133. Original emphasis).



The above extract highlights the attention to detail that is required in the realisation of the idealized muscular male body in *Men's Health*, and it encourages an internalised discipline that is supported in the wider magazine culture. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault outlined how disciplinary regimes produce docile bodies through an internalising gaze, and the detailed scrutiny of the body shown above highlights the relevance of this point (Foucault:2002). As Susan Bordo states, in Foucault's work,

... there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself (Bordo:1993:191).

The internalisation of self-surveillance techniques is encouraged in *Men's Health*, and discipline and control are paramount to the achievement of the 'perfect' body, a body that is always in process. In her discussion of new reproductive technologies, Rosi Braidotti further outlined how medical discourses acted by '...normalizing the dismemberment of the body, [and transformed] the body into a mosaic of detachable pieces' (Braidotti:1994:19). We can see a similar process in fitness culture and the representation of the male body as parts (or muscle groups) to be built and worked upon individually.

Fitness culture is positioned as an authority, and the authority that discourses of fitness exude gains credibility through its knowledge of the body in medical scientific terms. The value placed upon achieving a hard and muscular body through discipline and attention to minor detail is evident from the examples shown above. While readers can take some appropriate advice, the production of the body in *Men's Health* sets a



high ideal that can be viewed as unachievable in real terms, that is unless one was to dedicate one's life to the production and appearance of the body. Idealized bodies are promoted through disciplinary regimes such as the creation of a time frame that entices readers into discourses of control and stability while offering the fantasy of achieving muscular bodies in a relatively short space of time. Peter Jackson, Nick Stevenson and Kate Brooks claim that magazines such as *Men's Health* become a site of security for men in an increasingly unstable world, where exercise offers readers 'measurable effects' (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks:2001:96). Yet the measurable effects also function to place the male body under intense scrutiny through practices of fragmentation, elaborate exercise timetables, dietary regimes and quizzes/tests that show specific body areas in need of self-improvement. I now turn to the ways in which the reclaiming of the white body as an embodied image of masculinity has opened spaces for anxieties and fears caught up with the fragmented internal scrutiny of bodies as the disciplinary gaze becomes internalized.

### The Inner Body and the Internal Gaze

*Men's Health* is defined primarily through the discourses of fitness and health, two separate yet interlinking categories that encourage exercise and dietary regimes as central to the realisation of 'perfect' bodies. The idea of discipline is complex since we can view discipline as progressive through discourses of self-improvement, or might alternatively take a Foucauldian and Bakhtinian approach that views discipline as regulatory and repressive. My analysis of *Men's Health* falls into the latter category,



since although there are many educative facts to be learned about the body in *Men's Health*, a culture of fear is also evident. Health scare stories are regular features in *Men's Health* and can be seen to support the fear of morbidity and mortality. There is a fine line in *Men's Health* between what can be seen as good dietary advice from expert nutritionists, and scare stories about saturated fat leading to cancers and heart disease or features that visualize saturated fat as potential blockage through the use of diagrams that show the process of fats turning into artery blocking material.

In the two examples below we can see how *Men's Health* use visual diagrams that can be read alongside medical/scientific discourses of fear and prevention.

Figure 6.9

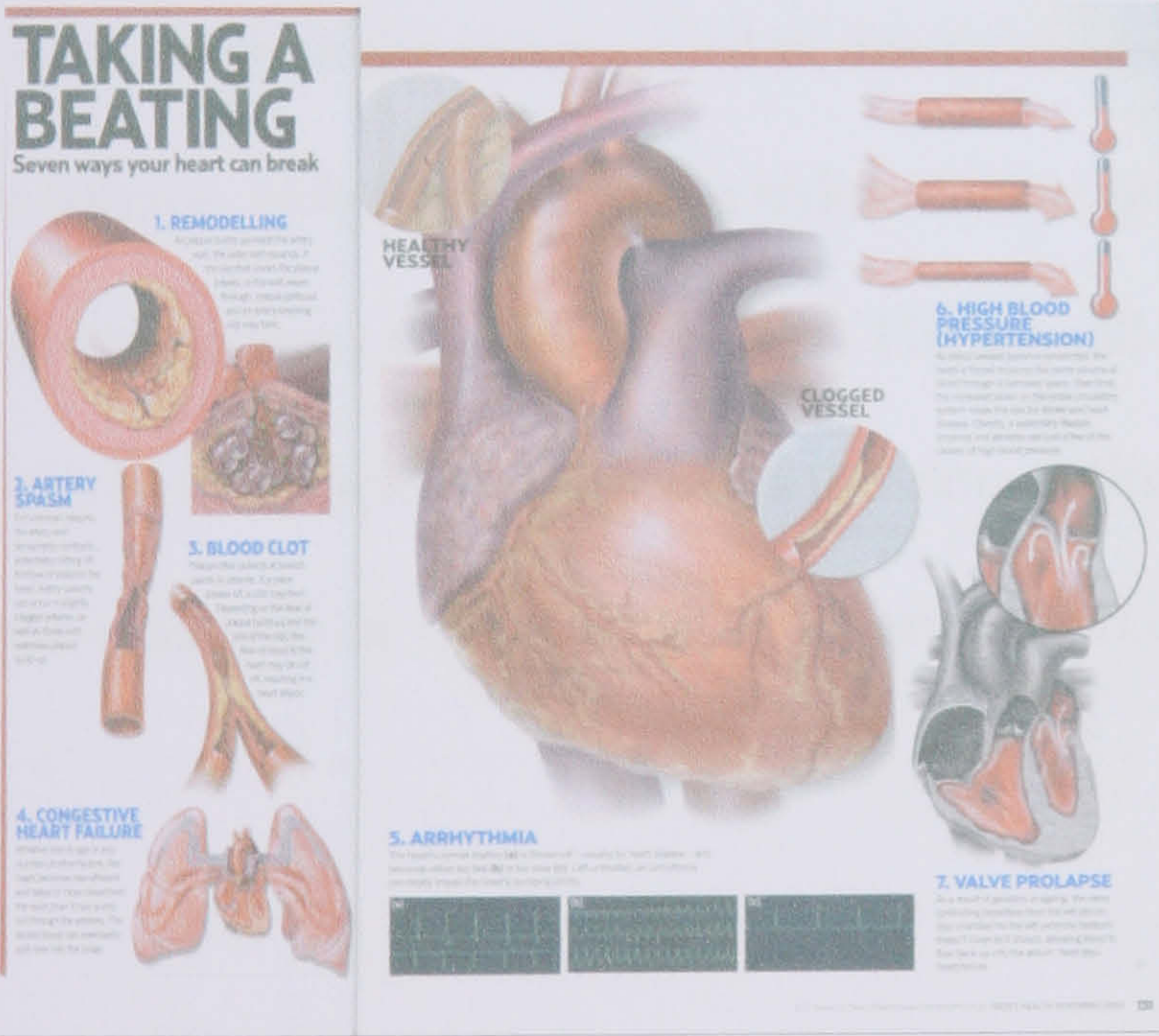
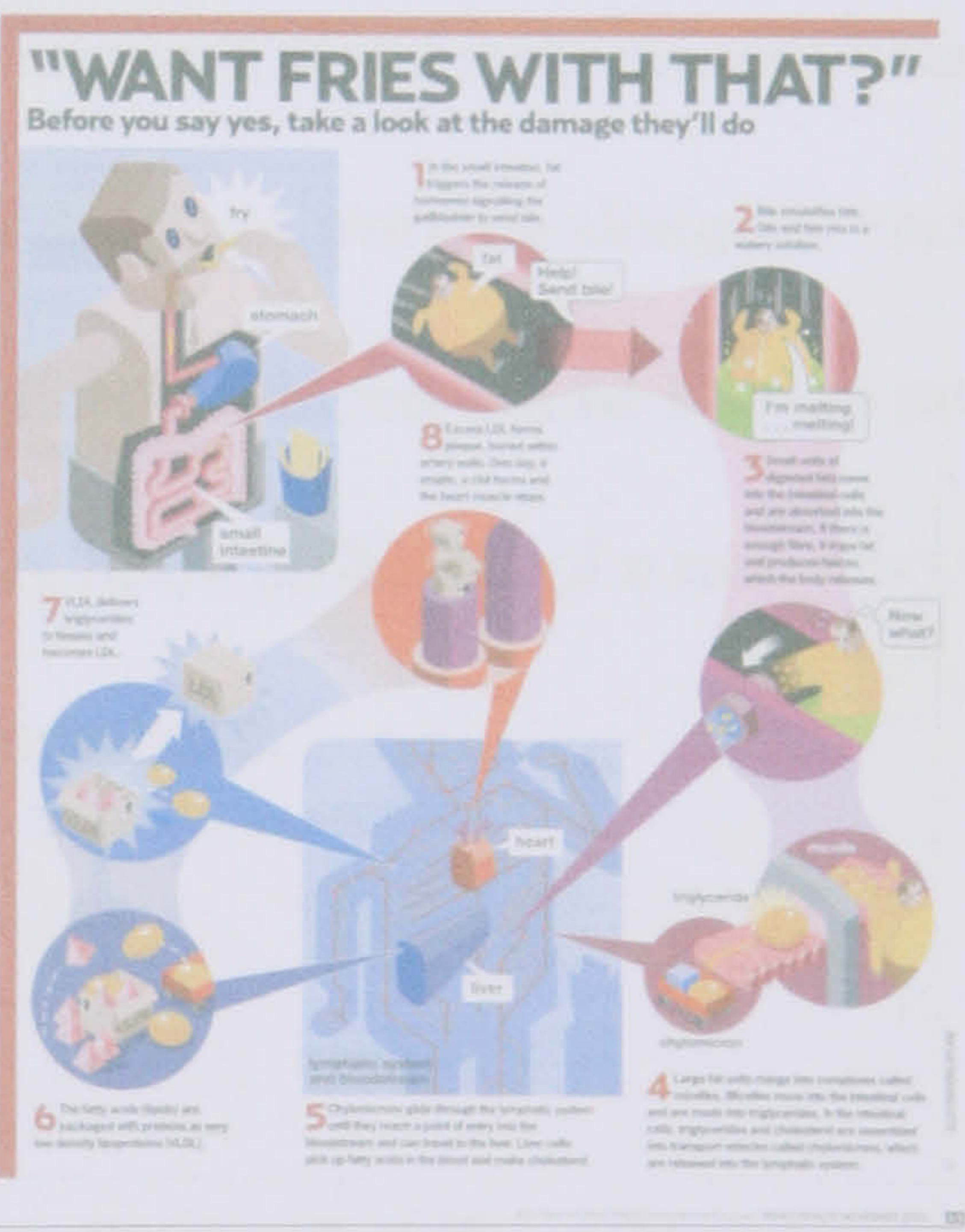


Figure 6.10<sup>10</sup>



The images above refer to the article 'My Black Heart: His artery was clear. A minute later it was clogged', where we find that *Men's Health* writer Peter Moore was living

<sup>10</sup> Moore, P. (2003) 'My Black Heart', *Men's Health*, November 2003: 128-134. Diagrams in Figure 6.9 and Figure 6.10 feature on pages 130-131. Photographed by Corbis/Mark Peterson.



with a life threatening heart condition despite having previously thought himself extremely fit and healthy. The article uses the two diagrams above to demonstrate the process of fat breakdown in the body and the problems that fat and clogged arteries inflict upon the heart muscle. In Figure 6.9 ‘Taking a beating: seven ways your heart can break’ we see a fairly realistic sketch of the heart and its major arteries, in full colour and with detail that includes veins, clots and plaque. The diagram explains the process of major heart diseases through allowing readers to see how clogged arteries might look inside their bodies, and provides comparison between healthy and unhealthy vessels. In contrast, in Figure 6.10 a cartoon image demonstrates how saturated fats can turn into life threatening clots. The image in Figure 6.10 offers a cause and effect mechanical view of the body, and uses comic style images and captions alongside scientific terminology to outline the chemical processes that occur within the body. Both of the images used in this article encourage a visual awareness of heart problems, with the contrasting styles of these two diagrams working alongside each other to convey the same message. The overall effect produced can be seen to promote fear, as the article itself discusses the extraordinary heart problems of a man who would not ordinarily be expected to experience heart complaints.

Similarly, an article featured in *Men’s Health* June 2003 called ‘Your New Heart Alarm’ journalist Jonathan Wanders stated that ‘Right now, a blood chemical called CRP is sounding an early warning siren in the arteries of millions of men. So why aren’t doctors listening?’ (Wanders:2003:81). Furthermore, according to this same article,



‘The simple fact that you leave your GP’s surgery having been told that your cholesterol levels are low and that you’re in good shape, it doesn’t mean that you’re not at risk of a heart attack’ (Wanders:2003: 81). The promotion of a culture of fear disciplines the body with the aim of regulating how you structure your life (what you eat, how (often) you exercise), and the intent of avoiding confrontation with death. Even though Peter Moore’s problems with his heart occurred regardless of his fit, healthy lifestyle, the article nevertheless contributes to the overall *Men’s Health* ethos that acquiring a disciplined, controlled body will empower you. Awareness of the body as an image of impending doom is further heightened by quizzes that compare the lifestyles of different men and ask questions such as ‘Who’ll get prostate cancer first? One of these three men is likely to succumb – will you?’ (*Men’s Health*, May 2002: 69). There are many articles featured in *Men’s Health* that inform readers of preventative measures to avoid heart disease that include exercise and diet. However, while articles on health issues could be seen to promote health awareness and induce discussion of doctor-patient power and knowledge, the shock tactics used by the writers in *Men’s Health* can also be read as inciting fear and panic. The ethos of *Men’s Health* works to improve the fitness and health of readers, however articles such as those discussed above have the effect of working through fear of fat, illness and mortality, and in turn support discourses that use diet and exercise to sculpt the ideal body.

Abjecting forces lie latent in *Men’s Health*, and while there is a commitment to the discussion of fat and the inner body, there is a refusal to directly confront the abject.



The diagrams shown in Figure 6.9 and Figure 6.10 control the potential of the abject both by inciting fear, and by sanitising the inner body through the use of illustrations. In Chapter 7 I explore *FHM*'s direct confrontation with the abject, as in *FHM* we frequently see open wounds and dismembered/decayed/diseased body parts in full colour photographs. In confronting abjection, the lad is seen to rebel against discipline, and the magazine environment of *FHM* provides a forum for grotesque display. In contrast, *Men's Health* uses visual images to portray health fears, and there are regular articles, cartoons and sketches that bring the internal body to the surface in order to create an increased (but controlled) awareness of disease and mortality. Unlike *FHM*, where the subject of inner body and mortality is frequently portrayed, *Men's Health* does not discuss the topic of death and mortality unless there is also preventative action to be taken by readers in the search for a long life. As Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks have argued in relation to *Men's Health* and the fitness press, '...the culture of bodily fitness and exercise is bound up with a fear of death and mortality' (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks:2001:101). Throughout my analysis of *Men's Health*, the language of the ideal body as 'hard' and 'bulked' creates a solid boundary. The vulnerability of the inner body beneath the skin contrasts with the hardness of solid outer bodies that have been scrutinized, weight-trained and disciplined. In the arena of identities constituted within *Men's Health*, the solid boundaries of the ideal body should not be penetrated by abjecting (and thus latent) forces such as fat, since fat can affect both the working of the inner body and the appearance of the outer body.



## Conclusion: Competing Negotiations of Heterosexism and Homoeroticism

In this chapter I have analysed how idealized male bodies are framed by magazine producers as objects of the gaze (with the beautiful, passive Adonis) and as objects of identification (or, rather, the desire for identification with the athlete or the Herculean muscular male body). The Adonis, athlete and Herculean images of the idealized male body have been used in this chapter as privileged points of identification, and have been seen to reclaim notions of the white muscular body as a literal embodiment of physical power and prowess from the terrain of black masculinity. However, while the idealized male body exists as a point of identification, I have also noted how some images of the Adonis (such as in Figure 6.3) absorb the gaze in ways that render the male body as passive and objectified, thus precluding identification with heterosexual male subjects/readers. Such passivity positions the male body as feminised, yet the smooth, toned and muscular form also maintain elements of masculinity with reference to the Adonis as an idealized form of the male body. In recent years, there has been a shift in complexity of the male gaze in magazine cultures, and while the male body resists objectification (for example, through the power and implied activity of the muscular form) consumer advertising has increasingly presented challenges to the male gaze in targeting heterosexual men as consumers of unambiguously homoerotic images. Where the gaze upon bodies of other men as Adonian, athletic or Herculean images of ‘perfection’ creates complexity in the relationship between desire and identification for viewers, the application of techniques to achieve idealised male bodies requires an internalised, disciplinary gaze. The disciplinary gaze of *Men’s Health* has also



subjected men to fragmentation and scrutiny, methods of visualisation that have traditionally been associated with women (through fetishising women as sexual objects), and also with race and disability, (bodies that have been positioned as curious objects of medical/scientific scrutiny in the search for signs of ‘inferiority’). White men have reclaimed the body as an embodied image of masculinity and power, however this power is double-edged, and has also opened spaces for obsession, anxiety and scrutiny. The idea of scrutiny is complex, and while one is encouraged to observe the bodies of muscular male models for signs of superiority, the anxieties and fear caught up with the scrutiny of reader bodies could lead one to the search for signs of personal inferiority through the internalisation of the disciplinary gaze.

There is now a complex constitution of narcissistic identification in men’s lifestyle magazines, and these hold in tension consuming heterosexual, hegemonic identities. While heterosexuality might seem at odds with images of perfected male homoerotic bodies, heterosexual men have increasingly been targeted with such images as a consuming audience. There are competing negotiations of homoeroticism and heterosexism in men’s lifestyle magazines, and the tensions hold in place a privileged consuming identity that contains ambiguities in terms of desire and identification, and that expresses areas of anxiety in the construction of hegemonic identities. Although there has been primary focus upon *Men’s Health* in this chapter, I have outlined how advertising represents a distinct space for representation of idealized muscular male bodies in *FHM*. Fashion is another distinctive space that replicates many of the ideal



standards of advertising in this culture, however the construction of the lad is caught up with rebellion against idealized bodies, with undisciplined bodies being a frequent feature of the representational framework. I now turn to the discussion of the role of the grotesque in *FHM*, and in doing so I examine how the lad fits into the grotesque framework alongside objectified ‘Others’ in the production of *FHM* as a grotesque text.



# Chapter 7

## Inside the ‘House of Horrors’: Reading the Grotesque in Men’s Lifestyle Magazines

In the last chapter I examined representations of idealized male bodies in men’s lifestyle magazines, and placed extensive focus on the context of *Men’s Health* as a culture that particularly reinforces the idealization of athletically muscular male bodies. In this chapter I move on to analyse images of the grotesque body and notions of grotesque performance as they appear in the contexts of *FHM* and *Men’s Health* magazine. As a text that frequently prints grotesque bodies and that encourages grotesque performance as an aspect of lad culture, *FHM* will be the primary reference point of my attempt to re-theorise the grotesque in order to take account of the positioning of men’s bodies. Following on from my literature review on the grotesque in Chapter 3, I use Bakhtin’s work on the grotesque, Kristeva’s writing on abjection, and associated feminist work on the female grotesque to analyse how men are positioned as grotesque in the context of men’s lifestyle magazines.

Alongside the analysis of *FHM* as a grotesque text, I consider how the grotesque functions as a latent presence in the culture of *Men’s Health*. Through the example of bodybuilding, I will analyse how over-conformity with the muscular male body



produces forms of excess that can be associated with the grotesque. I will examine the different ways that grotesque bodies are used in the contexts of men's lifestyle magazines, and will re-theorise the relationship between the male body and the grotesque to account for specific forms of the 'male grotesque'. I will also consider the grotesque bodies that arise from disciplinary regimes and overproduction. Analysis of the grotesque repertoires in men's lifestyle magazines must account for male bodies and (hyper)masculine performances, and such terms represent new directions to the study of masculinities and magazine cultures. This chapter contributes to knowledge in the study of masculinities, magazine cultures and the grotesque, and also with respect to a larger field of debate regarding masculinities as objects of the gaze.

The images that are deconstructed in this chapter are largely taken from the printed magazines *FHM* and *Men's Health*. However I have also selected visual material from *FHM.com* as an extension of the grotesque magazine culture. In Chapter 8 I discuss the implications of the grotesque in online magazines with reference to *FHM.com* as a website that foregrounds the grotesque in the production of homosocial communities and interactive spaces. The material used in Chapter 8 represents areas of interactivity with the grotesque, where readers submit their own unedited photographs, provide commentary and play games with images and narratives that can be read as grotesque. In this chapter I examine how the grotesque is *produced* by the online editorial team of *FHM* who choose images and frame the grotesque as an aspect of lad culture. However, interactive website material will be used from *menshealth.co.uk* in order to



account for the effects of the latent grotesque. The use of website material quotes male identified personae and the subjects that they raised in relation to the grotesque body as they appeared on *menshealth.co.uk* during the time of my research. The grotesque is not immediately apparent in *menshealth.co.uk*, and so it is necessary to understand how it lies latent in reader dialogues. The use of website material from *menshealth.co.uk* in this chapter remains distinct and relevant to the grotesque, in comparison with the work conducted in Chapter 8 that discusses the notion of online community and homosocial bonding between men.

## **Images of Revulsion: Abjection in *FHM* and *Men's Health***

### Wounds, Scars and Inner Flesh in *FHM*

Photographs of wounds, incisions, disease and decay are frequently published in *FHM*, with the feature 'Problems: Emergency Ward' displaying the more horrific aspects of grotesque representation in the magazine. *FHM*'s 'Problems' is a space for readers to submit photographs of themselves, or people they know, who have suffered gruesome injuries. The combination of horrific photographs sent in by readers, with captions (that are commonly puns) provided by *FHM*, work together in an attempt to provide a mixture of humour, fascination and repulsion. The title, 'Problems: Emergency Ward', contains connotations of passivity through medical intervention and an allusion to the contained atmosphere of hospital accident and emergency wards. The images shown in features such as 'Problems: Emergency Ward' are seen from the viewpoint of



the emergency services either before or immediately after medical treatment.

However, whether photographs are taken before, during or after treatment, all such images display bodies that have not healed from their respective wounds.

If we look at Figure 7.1 below, we can see how the feature ‘Problems: Emergency Ward’ frames abject images with humour that mocks and undermines the seriousness of the injuries displayed.

Figure 7.1<sup>11</sup>



In Figure 7.1 there are a variety of horrific images that range from chemically burned fingers (described as ‘Sticky Fingers’), maggots in the process of cleaning amputated

<sup>11</sup> *FHM*, April 2003: 210. Photographers unknown.



toes ('Worm Food') and a partly severed foot that is awarded 'Wound of the Month'. In each of the above photographs, male bodies are positioned as passive and are feminized through the display of blood, rips, tears, and through penetration from wood and worms. The bodies shown above are degraded and materialised, and invoke abject reactions of repulsion and disgust. On first glance, the male body is positioned as passive and vulnerable (bodies swell and rip open for public viewing), yet there is an ambiguity here that also renders the men displayed as brave. The fact that readers submit such photographs to the magazine, (a trend that is continued in the online environment of *FHM.com* as I discuss in Chapter 8), is significant in reading the images in 'Problems: Emergency Ward' as public displays of bravado. The *FHM* feature 'Problems' fits in with the general masculine bravado encouraged through the construction of the lad and lad culture (epitomised by drunken activities and excessive pranks). The comical framing and tone in 'Problems: Emergency Ward' attests to the recklessness of the lad as part of a wider self-deprecating culture. The lad is positioned as viewer of the grotesque in *FHM* in complex ways that involve him as a potential participant (both as seen above, and also in relation to billingsgate speech genres that I will discuss below) and observer of the grotesque bodies of 'Others'.

The display of injuries in 'Problems: Emergency Ward' often emphasise the activity preceding the event, using humour to laugh at the bizarre scenario and simultaneously to highlight the bravery of the injured subject. For example, in 'goatskin pouch' (shown in Figure 7.1, but reproduced for closer detail in Figure 7.2), we are presented with a



quartet of images that show in detail the testicles of a man who underwent emergency surgery after an accident on a cruise ship gym left him with testicular torsion.

Figure 7.2<sup>12</sup>



*FHM* quote the injured party as saying,

‘I was doing squats in the gym,’ [X] tells us, ‘when the ship rocked and I fell backwards doing the splits. In serious pain, I thought a shower would help – but the cold water made my nuts retract, tearing them away from the sack.’ Docs dosed the 26-year-old with painkillers, before slicing up his scrotum to save the rogue nut. ‘They said the pain was on a par with childbirth,’ winces the Portsmouth hero. ‘At least the nurse who shaved me was a babe’  
(*FHM*, April 2003: 210).

The images in ‘goatskin pouch’ are complex, combining emasculation with bravado and the bizarre. The man in the image is emasculated and made sexually redundant through the inability to use his penis. However in telling his story the man is described

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<sup>12</sup> *FHM*, April 2003: 210. Photographer unknown.



as a 'hero' by *FHM*, and the masculinity of the subject is implied by the event that preceded injury (the building of the body in the gym). Through implied action the man in the image resists objectification, and his grotesque penis stands apart from his subsequent interpretation of events and his ability to control pain without visible emotion. Furthermore, the final quotation ('at least the nurse who shaved me was a babe') repositions the man as a sexually desiring lad, turning him from object to subject of the gaze through the invocation of a sexually desirable woman's body. In *FHM*, grotesque images are the only space where the naked male body is displayed, and as we can see in the above images, the grotesque frames and justifies the direct display of testicles (Figure 7.2) and male buttocks (Figure 7.1). The strongly defensive heterosexual culture of *FHM* resists objectification of the male body, and in images of horror, the assertion of heavily masculine codes re-positions male vulnerability as bravado.

A further example of how images of readers' injuries can be read as heroic or brave can be seen in the *FHM* 'Wound of the Month' (shown on the next page).



Figure 7.3<sup>13</sup>



Here we can see the image of a foot that has been ripped open to the bone, and the potency of the image, revealing bone and inner flesh, alongside the use of close-up photography, directly invokes the abject. The image is horrific and inspires both fascination and repulsion. The photograph in Figure 7.3 was published in *FHM*'s 'Problems: Emergency Ward', and in the context of the page, the image was placed centrally against a black background that served to emphasise the contrasting colours of blood and bone. The foot shown is reminiscent of a war wound, while the description of the man as a 'biker' holds wider masculine connotations of daring and adventure. Yet aside from positioning the man whose foot is shown in the photograph as a 'biker', we are not informed of any details of the accident. *FHM* state,

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<sup>13</sup> *FHM*, October 2003: 275. Photographer unknown.



### **Nurse! The sick-bag**

Despite years of exposure to suffering, even *FHM* winced when this shot of David Payne's soon-to-be-chopped-off limb turned up. 'Cut my foot shaving!' the biker jokes. 'I could do with the 50 sheets to take my mind off the amputation.' Consider it done (*FHM*, 'Nurse! The sick-bag!' October 2003: 275).<sup>14</sup>

In the above quotation, *FHM* position themselves as experienced readers of abject images, and while the writer states that 'even *FHM* winced', the fact that the image is positioned centrally on the page demonstrates that the (personified) *FHM* overcame the test of enduring the abject. As a regular feature every month, *FHM*'s 'Problems' demonstrates the importance of the abject to *FHM* culture. Through images of horror, the lad is threatened by identification with the grotesque, and in resisting objectification, draws upon notions of masculinity to deflect the gaze. In 'Goatskin Pouch' (Figure 7.2), the lad was positioned as feminised, yet his refusal to display pain in the photograph, his use of humour in the interview, and reference to his heterosexual desire (for a 'babe' nurse who shaved his genitalia) introduced notions of hypermasculinity that resisted objectification. Jokes and humour deflect from the vulnerability of the injured body, and allow men to display their wounds as marks of masculinity. Despite the vivid display of shocking images, the display of pain or weakness is repressed or played down. Indeed, the contrast between the severity of the injuries and the use of humour to describe them heightens the performance of bravado and the bravery of the men who are able to endure pain without (visible) tears or complaint. The reader of *FHM* is also implicated in the bravery of the abject (in being positioned as observers of images of horror), and in *FHM* readers are encouraged to

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<sup>14</sup> In this context, '50 sheets' refers to money as the prize for featuring in *FHM*'s 'Wound of the Month' is £50 cash.



confront, and take pleasure in, abject emotions (such as repulsion) and desires (associated with fascination).

The images in *FHM*'s 'Problems' exclusively use male bodies in images of horror, and as I have suggested, the men photographed identify with the cultural framework of the lad (being predominantly young white men who employ humour to undermine their material degradation). The images in 'Problems: Emergency Ward' are similar to the 'trophy wounds' described by Jackie Cook in her analysis of the Australian men's surfer magazine *Waves* and its regular feature 'Slash of the Month' (Cook:2000). Cook noted how the images in *Wave*'s 'Slash of the Month' proudly displayed male injuries pre-medical intervention, and the same pattern emerges in *FHM*'s 'Emergency Ward'. Cook stated that the photographs in *Waves* magazine's 'Slash of the Month' embodied '...the ambivalence of the segment title: 'slash' in surfing terms denoting a bravura performance on the waves, as well as the bravado of 'copping a gruesome wound' (Cook:2000:182). While *FHM*'s title of 'Problems: Emergency Ward' provides a contained and more sanitised atmosphere than 'Slash of the Month', the images in this *FHM* feature are nevertheless vivid and abject, being photographed in states where the body has not healed pre- or post-medical intervention.

In the request for reader's to submit photographs to 'Problems: Emergency Ward', *FHM* issued the following appeal,



Has the vomiting stopped yet? Good. Now think hard: can you do better than these? If so, send photos of your 'best' wounds to Emergency Ward [*FHM*'s contact details are inserted here]. There's £50 for each victim, plus a great first-aid kit for wound of the month (*FHM*, October 2003: 275).

If the images in *FHM*'s 'Problems' were set outside the context of the magazine, and in isolation from the respective captions and commentary, they would certainly be categorised as scenes of horror or devastation. However, in the above quotation, there is a colloquial, light-hearted tone that frames the feature and diverts attention from the severity of the injuries in the images displayed in *FHM*'s 'Problems'. A notable aspect of photographs that depict blood and wounds in *FHM* is the absence of women, as it is male bodies and limbs that are photographed in bloodied states. In this respect we might imagine that the injuries that are printed in *FHM*'s 'Problems' are akin to war wounds and photojournalistic photography that portray the aftermath of devastation (indeed, women are often rendered invisible in the context of war). The fact that readers submit photographs to *FHM*'s 'Problems' suggests an element of pride and enthusiasm for public display, holding wider implications of courage and daring that link masculinities with bravery and heroism. The juxtaposition of submitting ones 'best wounds' to the magazine, and being called a 'victim' by *FHM* creates further ambivalence that surrounds the injured male body. As a magazine, *FHM* is often evasive and ambivalent in defining the lad as degraded and subjected or brave and daring.



## The Corpse and Abjection in *FHM* and *Men's Health*

The final images that I intend to discuss in this section relate to the presentation of corpses in *FHM* and *Men's Health*. In Figure 7.4 we can see the five-stage decomposition of a corpse in the *FHM* article 'I Grow Dead People'.

Figure 7.4<sup>15</sup>



Taken in a body farm where forensic anthropologists record the processes of decay in the human body after death, the above set of photographs clearly display the decomposition of the human body. *FHM* describe the 5 stages of decomposition as: '1. Fresh(ish); 2. Tender; 3. Crispy; 4. Simmering; 5. Maggot Pie' (*FHM*, November 2002: 70), and the use of culinary imagery adds to the facetious, irreverent tone of the piece. Images of death and decay appear less frequently in *FHM* than images of

<sup>15</sup> *FHM*, 'I Grow Dead People', November 2002: 70. Photographed by PSC.



wounds, incisions or decay in the living body (for example through disease, or decayed teeth). However, neither does the magazine shy away from displaying the corpse, and in the article 'Death Mountain' published in *FHM* during July 2003 readers are similarly presented with images of corpses that have been preserved by the minus degree temperatures of Mount Everest. In both articles factual information is presented to justify the display of the corpse, yet in typical *FHM* style, black humour is used to create a flippant tone of voice. With regard to the article 'Death Mountain', complaints were made by the family of one of the men who had died on the trek, and also by a fellow mountaineer who claimed that not only was the article in *FHM* factually incorrect, but also stated that 'to make a joke of the manner of someone's death in this way is just odious' (Douglas, *The Observer*, 13 July 2003: 8).

In *The Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva stated that, 'the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life' (Kristeva:1982:4). Through the image of the corpse one is faced with the inevitability of mortality. Death is apparent in the pages of *FHM*, and read in terms of abjection *FHM* can be read as a text that enforces confrontation with the abject. Yet the contexts in which the corpse is displayed in articles such as 'I Grow Dead People' and 'Death Mountain' are unusual insofar as they are framed with black (or 'sick') humour that functions to divert the serious implications of death. Furthermore, the corpses displayed look almost unreal, and, certainly having undergone the process of decomposition, they do not look 'human'. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva claimed that



literature was a privileged site for purifying the abject and that literature ‘...represents the coding of our crises, of our most serious and intimate apocalypses’ (Kristeva:1982:208). Although *FHM* appropriates forms of the grotesque in the objectification of ‘Others’ (as I will discuss below), the display of abject images can be seen to display and code masculine crises through the threats posed to hegemonic masculinity (through pranks, accidents, violence, disease). Humour is invoked as a way to control the emotional response of readers, yet such extreme images of horror incite strong reactions. In lads’ magazines such as *FHM* there is a fascination with pushing the boundaries of the imagination and testing the limits of what one can visually endure, without any corresponding engagement with the bodies and injuries displayed on an informative or emotional level. Yet there is engagement with the visual, and through vivid visual imagery, images of horror are piled up and thrown towards readers as we have seen in articles such as ‘I Grow Dead People’ and through regular features such as ‘Problems: Emergency Ward’ with its striking page layout as shown in Figure 7.1 (see above).

In *Men’s Health*, images of wounds and death are negligible in comparison with *FHM*, and primary focus is instead placed upon the sculpting of the muscular body through diet and exercise. However, in the article ‘Dead Men’s Tales’ published in *Men’s Health* during December 2003, there was a rare instance of dead bodies being photographed for readers to observe (Armstrong:2003:172-179). In ‘Dead Men’s Tales’ *Men’s Health* used the context of the autopsy suite at Edinburgh’s City Mortuary



to discuss the deaths of young men who had died prematurely through accident or suicide. The writer of the article, Stephen Armstrong, stated that, 'these pictures and the tragic stories behind them are tough to take. But by finding out what happened to these men you might stand a better chance of avoiding their fate' (Armstrong:2003: 172). In contrast to the *FHM* articles discussed above, 'Dead Men's Tales' enforces a serious tone to the subject of death, acknowledging both the severity of death and the image of the corpse. Indeed the photographs displayed in this article are more daunting than in *FHM* since, being new corpses, they still have clear human form, unlike the image of the corpse in Figure 7.4.

In Figure 7.5 (shown on the next page), the use of recognisable flesh coloured bodies present a striking contrast to the bloated, brown, maggot-ridden corpse in Figure 7.4.



Figure 7.5<sup>16</sup>



The faces in 'Dead Men's Tales' are turned away from the camera, digitally blurred or cropped to respect the anonymity of the dead, and indeed in the article we can see that one man has a tag around his wrist stating 'unknown male' (*Men's Health*: December 2003:177). The bodies in 'Dead Men's Tales' are realistic and are abject insofar as they show us what we 'permanently thrust aside in order to live' (Kristeva:1982:3). However, by showing us images of the corpse in a controlled medical setting (and in the wider context of *Men's Health* as a fitness magazine) the image is contained and purified by medical/scientific discourses. The display of corpses in a medical setting, and the deconstruction (or autopsy) of the bodies of corpses to reveal the causes of death support the wider culture of fear that is prevalent in *Men's Health*.

<sup>16</sup> Armstrong, S. 'Dead Men's Tales', *Men's Health* December 2003: 176. Photographed by David Moore.



In the above article *Men's Health* use visual imagery as a prevention tactic to urge readers to avoid premature death, using the corpse and the positioning of the coroner to demonstrate the seriousness of this issue. For example, the article contains a photograph of a black, diseased lung and states,

The black is carbon and it's there forever,' says Busuttil, peering down on the dissected lung [...] Lung cancer is only part of the story: the hydrocarbons and cadmium in the cigarette slowly poison you; the nicotine contracts your blood vessels, raising your blood pressure and putting you at risk of heart attack and stroke; the smoke irritates your lungs; the chemicals irritate your heart (Armstrong, 'Dead Men's Tales', *Men's Health* December 2003:176).

The above quotation works with the intent of fear and prevention, using the example of smoking and the vivid image of black lungs and the corpse to highlight the issue of cancer and smoking related deaths. The use of vivid imagery and direct language produce a cause and effect model and there is despondency in the quote 'the black is carbon and it's there forever' that could produce panic or worry with readers who have been, or are, smokers, with notions of impending doom. Through the display of the corpse *Men's Health* is offering readers an image of horrific death to highlight their own message on the importance of health and fitness through discipline and hard work. The abject repositioning of the self is caught up with discourses of fear, prevention and control, rather than embracing the subject of one's own inevitable mortality. Audiences are positioned as coroners, deconstructing the cause of death rather than treating the body of the corpse as an image of spectacle. While *FHM* uses humour to frame images of injury and death, *Men's Health* adopts a sober tone, working upon fear, prevention, and the rejection of (premature) mortality. *Men's Health* represses the abject, however the abject lies latent in the overproduction of the body through discourses of health and fitness, and the need to expel forces that threaten material life.



## Abjection, 'Entertainment' and Shock

Images of horror in *FHM*'s 'Problems' or articles such as 'I Grow Dead People' invoke revulsion, and the use of full colour, close-up photography positions readers directly in front of the abject. However, as Susan Sontag has suggested, in contemporary western media culture we are saturated with images of the pain of others to the extent that images can become diluted in meaning. Sontag stated that,

Imagery that would have had an audience cringing and recoiling in disgust forty years ago is watched without so much as a blink by every teenager in the multiplex. Indeed, mayhem is entertaining rather than shocking to many people in most modern cultures. But not all violence is watched with equal detachment. Some disasters are more apt subjects of irony than others (Sontag:2003:90).

In *FHM* 'mayhem is entertaining', and mayhem and shock are pivotal aspects of lad culture. While regular readers of *FHM* might expect to find images of blood, wounds and corpses in the magazine, each month's images are both so random and extreme that the reader cannot anticipate the particular nature or extremity of the following month's images. One might speculate that part of the reader's pleasure rests in witnessing *FHM* extend the limits of the grotesque body and the grotesque imagination. Images of blood and gore are frequently seen in television media through news reports and documentaries, however the photographs of horror published in *FHM* use vivid close-up photography of images of injuries or diseases that are relatively uncommon outside of the context of medical textbooks or hospital emergency rooms. The notion of shock is complex and while one may feel shock at being confronted with images of the inner body surfacing through the skin or at photographs of the corpse on a direct level, there is no necessary shock at the fact that the images are displayed in the context of *FHM*, a text that indulges readers in the transgression of moral codes.



Shock relates to audience expectation and the ways in which readers become accustomed to viewing images in *FHM*. For example the BBC news article 'Magazine Criticised For 'Shock' Tactics' dated 27 September 2001 outlined the case of a schoolgirl who fainted and later died after having seen grotesque images in *FHM* (*News.bbc.co.uk*, 'Magazine Criticised for Shock Tactics', accessed 18.06.02). The *BBC* stated that,

An inquest in Harrogate has recorded the accidental death of Odette Coulson who fainted and banged her head after seeing images in publication *FHM*. After the hearing North Yorkshire vet Andrew Coulson, 48, urged publishers not to chase circulation at any cost. And he warned parents to be more aware of 'unsuitable material' to which their children may have access. His daughter fainted and hit her head on the pavement after being shown a copy of the *FHM* supplement Carnival of the Grotesque, which is also available online [...] But he [Mr Coulson] said he had not made a complaint to Emap, the publishers of *FHM*, because they would not have deliberately produced the supplement to cause harm (*News.bbc.co.uk*, 'Magazine Criticised for Shock Tactics', accessed 18.06.02).

While *FHM* cannot be held responsible for those who read their magazine, the case of the schoolgirl in the above article highlights how shock value relates to the positioning of audiences as consumers and their expectations of what magazines have to offer in their representational frameworks. One who reads *FHM* without expectation of the grotesque will be shocked at images displayed in different ways to those who engage with the culture of the lad and are familiar with the humour of the magazine.

The construction of the lad in *FHM* marks him as a sophisticated reader of the grotesque, and features such as 'Problems' form an essential aspect of the cultural representation of the lad as simultaneously vulnerable, reckless and brave. Horrific images in *FHM* (such as the bloodied and wounded bodies shown in Figure 7.1 and



Figure 7.2) reveal a fascination with the abject, yet also dilute its potential for disruption through saturation and spectacle. In contrast, the grotesque runs latent in *Men's Health*, and I will discuss how the magazine culture represses the potential of the grotesque in more detail below. However, in articles such as 'Dead Men's Tales', readers are positioned in relation to the abject in order to deny and repress mortality, and this is supported in the wider framing discourses of *Men's Health* that relate to fitness and exercise. I will now continue to analyse the split in representations of the grotesque in *FHM* and *Men's Health* through reference to fat, male breasts and beer bellies, and will examine how bodies of visual excess are framed in each of these contexts.

## Male 'Tits', Saggy Stomachs and Beer Bellies

Two popular areas where fat men are portrayed as grotesque are in the discussion and representation of male breasts and beer bellies. I will now continue to examine how readers of *menshealth.co.uk* discuss male breasts in terms that cast the male body as grotesque, and which invoke the female body.<sup>17</sup> The way that hard six-pack torsos are contrasted with soft, feminine breasts is notable, as are the ways that the grotesque is projected onto the maternal in *menshealth.co.uk*. Excess fat is a constant source of

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<sup>17</sup> I have chosen website material from *menshealth.co.uk* to represent the grotesque male body as feminised in the culture of *Men's Health* since online participants provide more direct access to displays of the grotesque. Online readers more readily discuss imperfect bodies and the inability to live up to idealized standards of the muscular male body. In the printed version of *Men's Health*, the grotesque is repressed by over-produced, idealized and muscular male bodies. Unlike the printed magazine, affective and personal dialogues on *menshealth.co.uk* display areas of ambiguity or conflict with idealized perceptions of the muscular male body.



anxiety amongst online participants of *menshealth.co.uk*, most particularly where it appears on the torso (chest and stomach), and threads such as ‘Six pack but saggy tits’ or ‘Tits like a bird! Please HELP!’ use feminine imagery as a descriptive metaphor for over-developed or protruding male breasts. The language used by men writing about their enlarged breasts in *menshealth.co.uk* reveals a self-consciousness about showing the body in public, with the underlying implication being that male breasts feminize the male body and position it as grotesque in ways that should not be viewed in public.

For example, one participant of *menshealth.co.uk* posted a message board thread called ‘Six pack but saggy tits!’ and stated,

I'm well on my way to a six-pack but am let down by the fact that I've got pointed flabby tits! I've tried all number of exercises to get rid of them but they never change shape. When I touch them they just feel as if there's loose skin in there. I've been checked for Gynaecomastia and I haven't got it.

Is surgery the only option?? And what is the process. i.e. will I have to be off work for a while, avoid exercise, etc.

What's the point in having good stomach muscles if you daren't take your top off because of your tits?? I'm going on holiday soon and not looking forward to it.

(*menshealth.co.uk*, ‘Six pack but saggy tits’, accessed 20.06.03).

The word ‘tits’ directly invokes women’s breasts, and in this post the use of ‘pointed flabby tits’ feminises the participant’s body as emasculated and undesirable. The contrast between the image of the writer’s masculine six-pack and his feminine ‘tits’ causes anxiety in the self-perception of his body. There is a contrast invoked by the classical image of the male body (with the six-pack) and the feminised grotesque (as ‘pointed flabby tits’). Gynecomastia, or emphasised male breasts, is a medical



condition linked with the overproduction of oestrogen in the male body. In *Men's Health* gynecomastia is outlined as a natural yet undesirable condition that should be remedied as much as possible through diet and exercise, or in the more extreme cases through cosmetic medical intervention. In Mary Russo's analysis of *The Female Grotesque*, women's bodies were marked as the most powerful configurations of the grotesque, and this is certainly apparent in *menshealth.co.uk* where rejection of the grotesque is based upon the repression of the maternal body. The anxiety caused to the above writer by his enlarged male breasts renders them horrific, and rather than accept or embrace the body as grotesque, the writer instead searches for a remedy for his grotesque 'tits' via medical channels. Maternal bodies are complexly represented in *Men's Health*, and while there have been instances of the pregnant body in the wider culture of the magazine, both visually and in message board dialogues on 'Being a Dad', feminine imagery is often used to signify the grotesque male body as weakened or emasculated.<sup>18</sup>

Another message board participant on *menshealth.co.uk* started a thread called 'Tits like a bird! Please HELP!', and stated,

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<sup>18</sup> For example, during 2002, the fashion house Burberry ran advertisements that featured a pregnant woman as part of a couple, set as an image of serenity and sensitivity, and photographed in black and white (*Men's Health*, December 2002: 59). I will discuss this image later (see Figure 7.6). 'Being a Dad' is one of the many message boards available on *menshealth.co.uk*.



I've had enough!

I'm 6'1 about 13 Stone (82kg) and shaped like a woman! I have wide hips, a belly as though I've just given birth and tits to match! Not a pretty sight.

I'm looking to slim down and tone up and have started the following routine.

Monday - 40 mins cardio and weights (upper and lower body)

Tuesday - Rest

Wednesday - 40 Mins Cardio and weights (Upper and lower body)

Thurs - Rest

Fri - 40 Mins cardio and weights (upper and lower body)

Sat - 1 Mile jog

Sun - Rest

I'm trying my best to eat healthily, following advice I have read on these message boards.

Does my workout sound suitable for what I'm trying to do? I'm aiming to slim down to 12 stone and define my body a bit. Am I going the right way about it?

Cheers

(*menshealth.co.uk*, 'Tits like a bird! Please HELP!', accessed 14.02.03).

Once again, enlarged male breasts are portrayed as feminine, and indeed the reader views himself as embodying femininity through his breasts, hips and stomach. The phrase, 'a belly as though I've just given birth', extends the image of flabbiness into visions of post-birth excess skin, and we might also think of the scarring and stretch marks that accompany the child-birth process as 'not a pretty sight'. In his outline of an exercise regime, the writer demonstrates a physical reaction to the grotesque insofar as he intends to purge the abject that has settled on his body as 'Other' through exercise and discipline. While linked to the maternal, Julia Kristeva also claimed that abjection represented a narcissistic crisis, and stated that 'narcissism then appears as a regression to a position set back from the other, a return to a self-contemplative, conservative, self-sufficient haven' (Kristeva:1982:14). The latent grotesque in the culture of *Men's*



*Health* and the avid promotion of the idealized muscular male body lends itself to a conservatism that represses the potential of the grotesque as an embodiment of subversion. I have used extracts from the *menshealth.co.uk* message boards in order to uncover areas of the male grotesque body that are denied expression in the over-produced, disciplined body of *Men's Health* magazine. Indeed, later I discuss how the over-produced, muscular male body lends itself to another form of the latent grotesque in the culture of *Men's Health*: the grotesque bodybuilder.

The above messages posted by participants on *menshealth.co.uk* directly invoke the maternal, and supports claims by Barbara Creed and Mary Russo that women's bodies present the most visible formulations of the grotesque, whether such visions of feminine excess are seen on men's or women's bodies (Creed:1993, Russo:1994). As Julia Kristeva and Elizabeth Grosz suggest, the maternal is not specific to women, and it represents a space which 'like the abject, is the splitting, fusing, merging, and fragmenting of a series of bodily processes beyond the will and control of the subject' (Grosz:1990:96). The above quoted messages from *menshealth.co.uk* describe bodies that have transgressed desired boundaries in ways that assert control through regimes of discipline and exercise, and which refuse to embrace the ambiguity and materiality of the fat body. Women are positioned as 'Other' in ways that create distance between the men and their own, feminised bodies, although the first writer recuperates some of his masculinity with reference to his 'six-pack'. The image of the post-pregnancy stomach in the second message board thread ("Tits like a bird please HELP!!") is vividly



grotesque and contrasts with the pregnant stomach as an unfertile and redundant image. The bodies of pregnant women have been displayed inside *Men's Health*. For example, there was a prominent advertising campaign run by Burberry in 2002 that featured a black and white photograph of a woman in the advanced stages of pregnancy who was not cast as grotesque or marked by fear and repulsion.

Figure 7.6 <sup>19</sup>



In the above advertisement, black and white photography assists in the production of a serene image, with the draping of the shawl upon the rounded, smooth stomach and the husband's protective hand (he wears a wedding ring) controlling connotations of the grotesque. In *Men's Health* and *menshealth.co.uk* there is a complex relationship with

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<sup>19</sup> Advertisement for Burberry Fragrance 'Touch'. *Men's Health*, December 2002: 59.

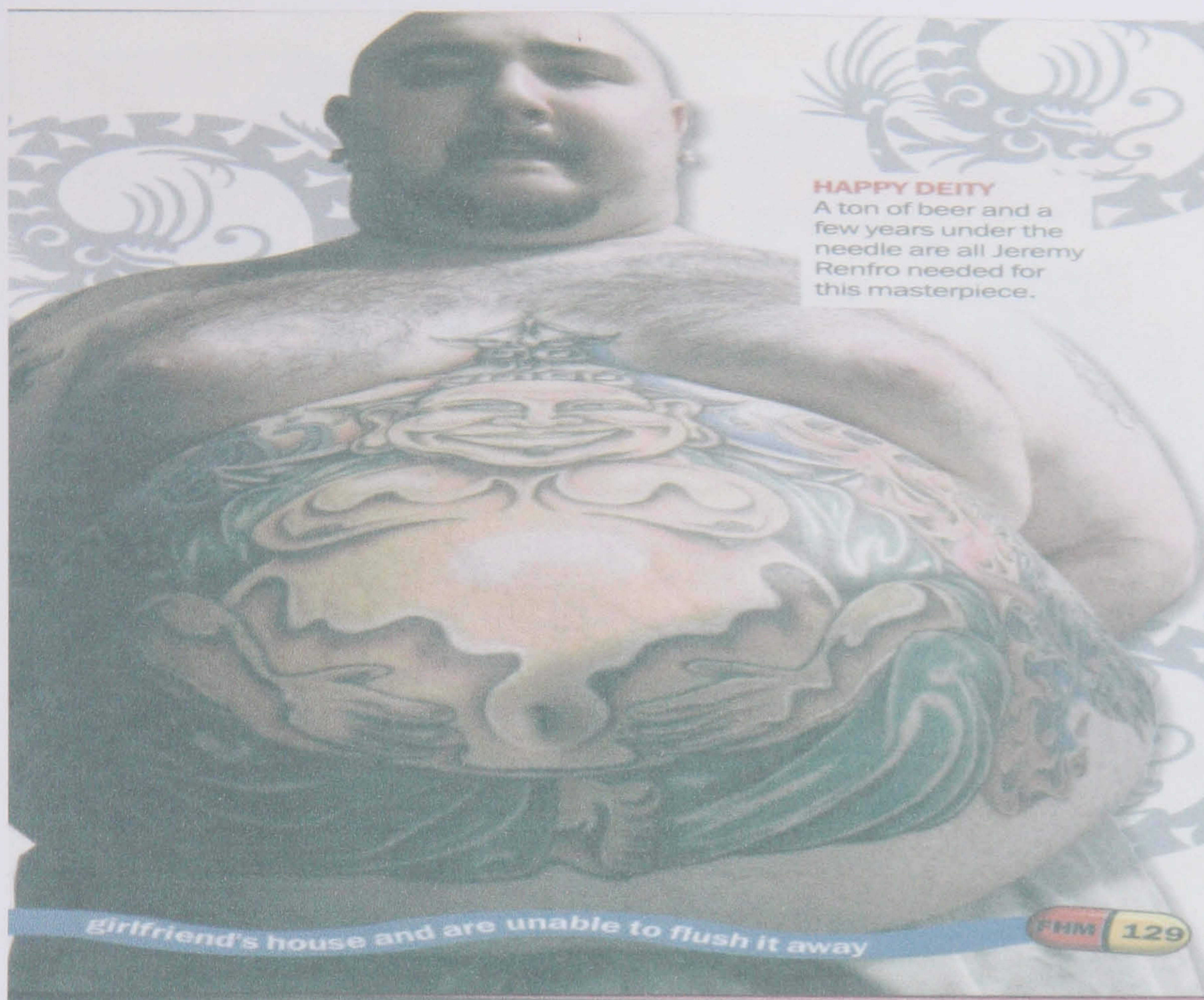


maternal bodies (and men frequently engage with the online message board 'Being a Dad' on *menshealth.co.uk*). The pregnant, yet smooth, image of the fertile stomach above holds a distinctively different impact to the saggy, post birth excess skin that was suggested in the quotation taken from 'Tits like a bird please HELP!!'

Pregnancy can appear as grotesque on male bodies through notions of the beer belly, where the image is ostensibly linked to femininity. However, the beer belly is also a product of masculinity and in western culture it is an image that is primarily associated with men who frequent pubs and drink alcohol such as lager or ale. It is an image linked to excessive consumption (of food and beer) and which resists discipline (through diet and exercise). In its associations with excessive beer drinking, the beer belly signifies masculinity, and in Figure 7.7 and Figure 7.8 below we can see how the rounded beer belly holds wider connotations of strength and power that are associated with the male body. In Figure 7.7 (shown on the next page) we can see a close up image of the beer belly, and the man in the photograph is shown as content in his size in his willingness to be publicly displayed.



Figure 7.7<sup>20</sup>



The supporting caption to Figure 7.7 reads ‘Happy Deity: A ton of beer and five years under the needle are all Jeremy Renfro needed for this masterpiece’ (*FHM*, ‘Little Book of Bloke’, June 2003:129). The tattoo of Buddha on the stomach of the man in Figure 7.7 is significant, as not only does it show him embracing his size and shape (the Buddha is an icon known for its rounded stomach), but the image of the Buddha is also a masculine deity. The positioning of the camera, facing upwards towards the man increases the perception of his size and stature, while body hair and tattoos connote masculinity. Although the man in Figure 7.7 is seen to have male breasts (an image of abjection for the readers of *menshealth.co.uk* quoted above), he is also portrayed as content (‘Happy Deity’), embracing his size and shape.

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<sup>20</sup> *FHM*, ‘Little Book of Bloke’, June 2003:129. Photographer unknown.



Images of beer bellies also connote masculinity through the idea of the 'strong man'.

Figure 7.8<sup>21</sup>



For example, in Figure 7.8 we can see a beer-bellied man with a superimposed car on his head, as an image of implied physical strength, and *FHM* use the headline 'Supermen!' to frame both the image and the content of the article on extreme feats of human strength. In this photograph, the man's 'beer belly' looks almost pregnant in its size and shape, yet it does not detract either from his strength or his masculinity. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin used the image of pregnancy and childbirth to represent regeneration and rebirth in ways that was not gender specific, yet which was founded upon images of women's bodies. In the two images shown directly above, the pregnancy of the beer belly is born from excess that involves culturally male activities (pub culture, beer drinking and feats of physical strength). The image of the beer belly

<sup>21</sup> *FHM Little Book of Bloke*, June 2003: 10-11. Photographer unknown.



is diverse and can range from notions of laziness (such as the stereotype of the couch potato) to men who perform in traditionally masculine activities such as strong men competitions or skills-based sports such as darts. The beer bellied man does not represent an ideal of hegemonic masculinity in the context of *FHM* or *Men's Health*, yet his body often connotes brute strength, power, and short term bursts of energy (as opposed to the long term endurance associated with the ideal athletic physique of *Men's Health*).

The beer belly must not simply be equated with obesity, and instead refers to the size and shape of the protruding stomach that stands out disproportionately from the body. While men who have beer bellies can be seen to embody a masculine aesthetic, images of general obesity usually stand in contrast as feminised images that sag under weight and excess skin. For example, if we look at Figure 7.9 (on the next page) we can see how general obesity might be contrasted with the beer belly.



Figure 7.9<sup>22</sup>



The man in Figure 7.9 displays a passive representation of the fat male body. The covering of the genitals and his pose are significant in constructing the man as lacking masculinity and power, objectifying him as a spectacle to be laughed at. His pose displays a staged modesty (by covering his genital area with his hands), and his hands signify an almost vaginal opening that further renders the man as a feminized object. The man's body in Figure 7.9 contrasts significantly with the beer bellies shown above since the image does not connote strength and power. In Figure 7.9, the man's body sags under weight and he is naked, soft and effeminate. In contrast, the beer belly suggests hardness of character, and its associations with beer drinking culture indicate familiarity with traditional masculine practices. Through the notion of the beer belly we can see how fat bodies can be constructed as hypermasculine, using short-term

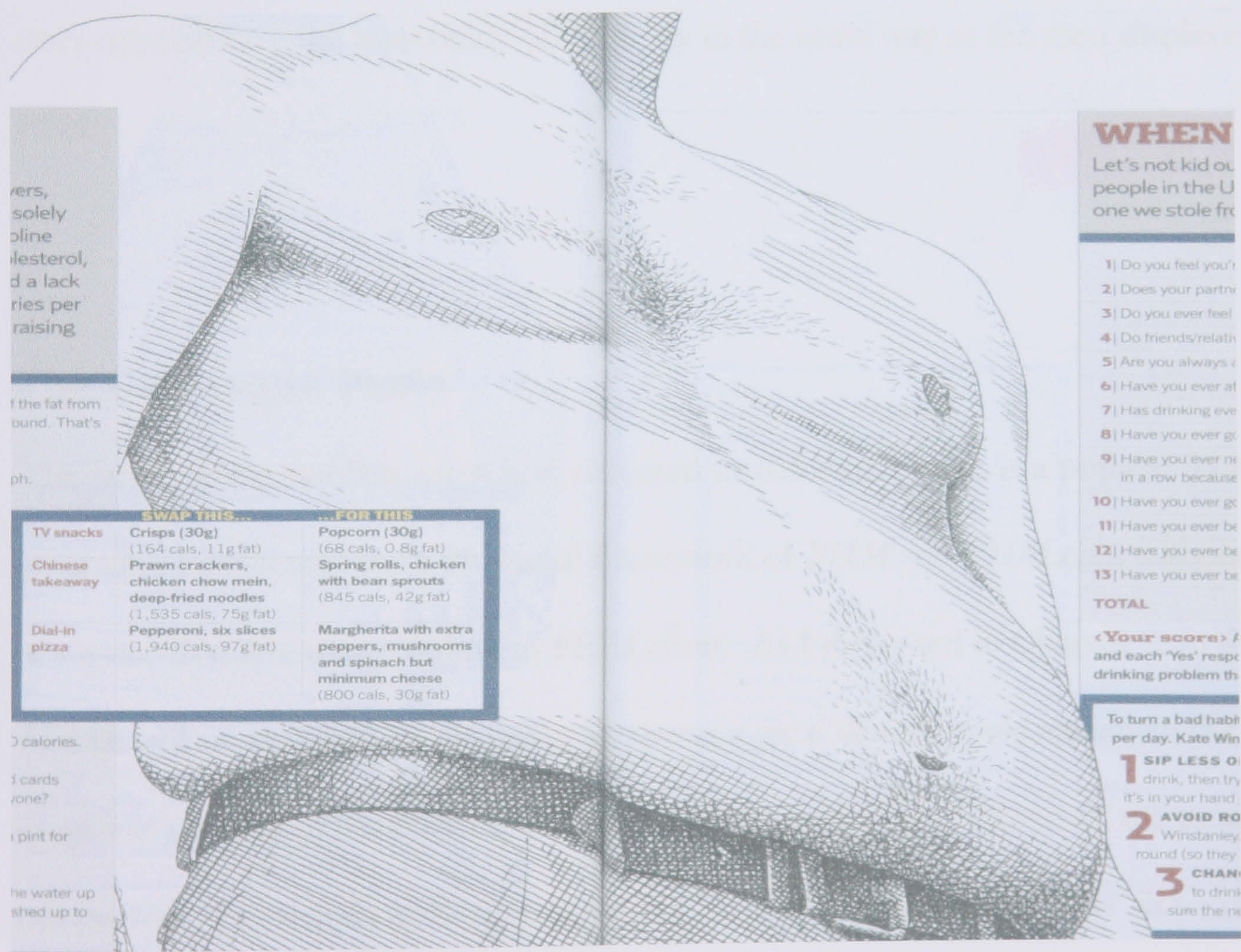
<sup>22</sup> *FHM*, 'Red and Raw', July 2003: 215. Photographer unknown.



brute strength to connote power like a grotesque version of the hypermasculine figure of Hercules.

However, the hypermasculine beer belly is contextually specific to *FHM* and does not appear in *Men's Health*. In *Men's Health*, the beer belly is associated with the grotesque as a body that is undisciplined and out of control. If we look at Figure 7.10, we can see an example of how the beer belly is targeted as an image of fat that must be remedied through fitness and diet by way of an illustration.

Figure 7.10<sup>23</sup>



<sup>23</sup> *Men's Health*, taken from a double page spread with the heading 'Have the Beer Not the Belly', October 2003: 134-5. Illustration by Getty, Rupert, Nightingale, PSC.



The contextualising debate of the article concerns the amount of calories and sugar in alcohol, and whether readers should be concerned with their weight as a result of drinking alcohol. The article decides that beer drinking is fine and that, 'you can blame booze for a lot of unwanted things, hiccups, hangovers, Damien your eldest - but that layer of lard around your midriff isn't solely down to the grog' (*Men's Health*, October 2003: 134). The use of illustration accompanied by statistical information is clinical, and the advice given on how to control diet and exercise work to control the image of the beer belly as a threat to the disciplined body that is promoted in *Men's Health*. There are no connotations of pregnancy in the image, the beer belly is tightly controlled and framed by discourses of health, fitness and nutrition, and the image does not embrace the materiality of the body in the same way as the men displayed in *FHM*.

## **The Grotesque Penis**

The image of the swollen, stretched, diseased or deformed penis is a popular form of grotesque representation in the visual framework of *FHM* and *FHM.com* (although it is a more frequent image online in *FHM.com*). As I discussed in Chapter 6, in *Men's Health* and *menshealth.co.uk*, readers express a great deal of penis anxiety in the magazine's problem pages or through online message boards. However, the penis is not portrayed as visually grotesque in *Men's Health* culture, and narrative descriptions of the penis reveal insecurities about size, performance and associated perceptions of virility and 'manhood' rather than the penis being presented as humorous or



positioned as abject. I will now therefore deconstruct images of the grotesque penis in *FHM* and *FHM.com*, and will offer insights into why the grotesque penis is relevant to the construction of heterosexual masculinity in this culture. In *FHM* sexual virility and heterosexual desire is important to constructions of masculinity, and is implied through the desire for women's bodies. Images of women form the primary object of the gaze in *FHM* and *FHM.com*, and sexual fantasies are projected onto women's bodies to define the boundaries of male sexuality. Yet wherever the penis is visually displayed in *FHM* or *FHM.com*, it is cast as grotesque, with photographs serving to feminize the grotesque penis either as swollen or as penetrable. I will now continue to discuss the visually grotesque penis through reference to images of swollen and penetrable, emasculated penises. I have used both printed and website material here to examine how the culture of *FHM* produces images of the grotesque penis, and also to consider how men are seen to use their bodies to make their own penis look grotesque.



Figure 7.11 <sup>24</sup>



In Figure 7.11 we can see the penis represented as swollen and inflated, presumably the result of deformity, disease or photo editing, with the accompanying title and caption stating 'Big Cock Blues! Just got the regulation length? Don't despair – an over-sized tallywhacker isn't all it's cracked up to be' (*FHM*, 'The Little Book of Bloke', June 2003: 120-1). Visually, the swollen penis is represented as a spectacle, emasculated through defect and objectified by close-up photography, fragmentation and the positioning of a hazard stop sign around the penis. The swollen penis is also animalistic, which is enhanced by the fact that we do not see the human face. In the article, the grotesque framework resists the glorification of the large penis, using the

<sup>24</sup> *FHM*, 'The Little Book of Bloke', June 2003: 120-121.



inflated image, hyperbolic language and humour to undermine insecurities over penis size. For example, *FHM* state,

**Count your blessings.**

Fact: we're all well hung anyway. The human male has the largest penis (proportional to body) of all bipeds.

**Hygiene.**

Imagine your freakish man-meat brushing the porcelain every time you take a dump. Bleargh!

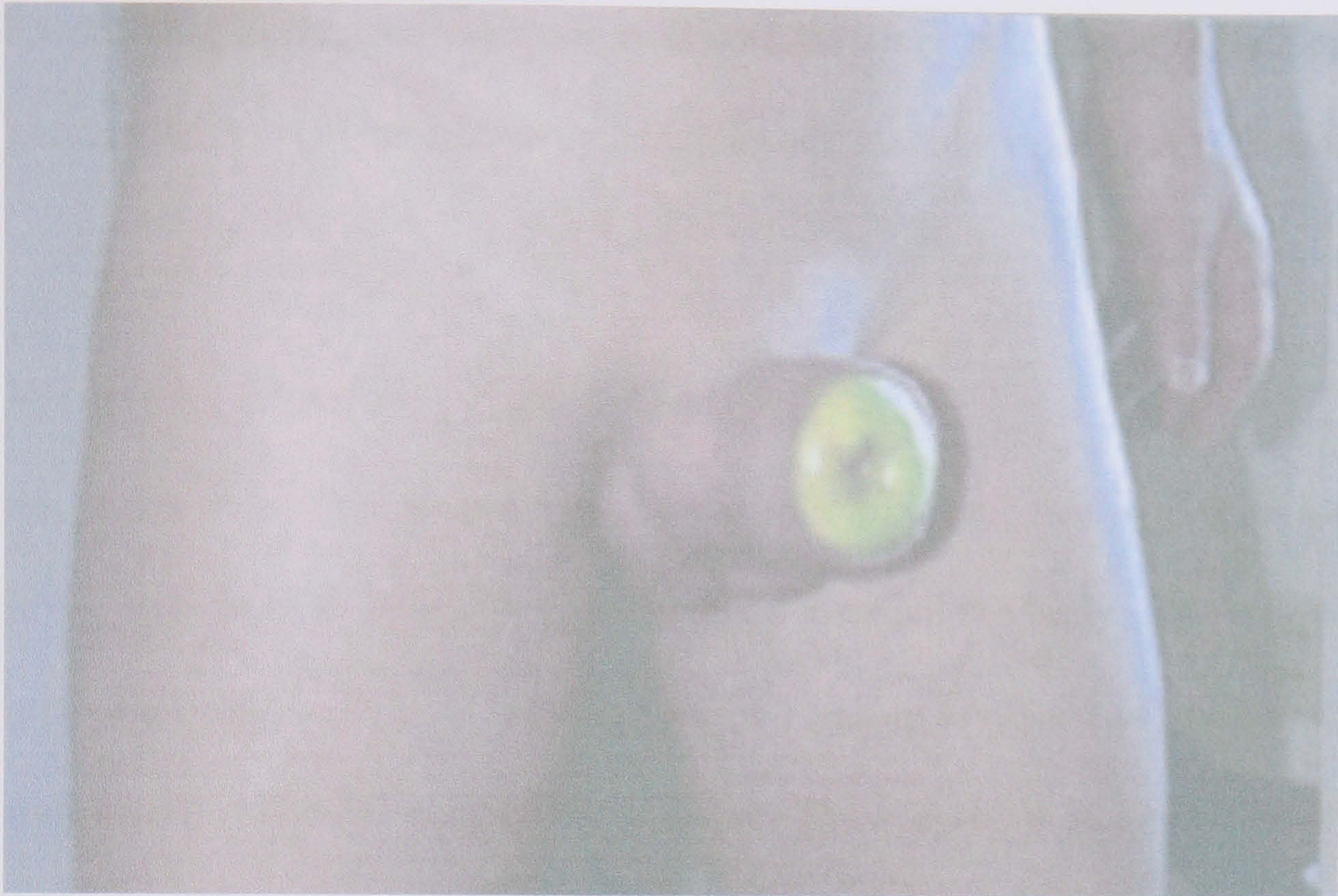
(*FHM's Little Book of Bloke*, June 2003: 120).

The exaggerated image of the swollen penis in Figure 7.11 (taking up one whole page in an A5 sized booklet) is positioned as spectacle, as a grotesque 'Other' that resists identification with readers. There is ambiguity surrounding the positioning of the lad as the implied viewer of the grotesque that on one hand implicitly positions the lad himself as grotesque (with the abject threat of injury, and also in the use of billingsgate speech genres), and on the other hand that searches for signs of difference and inferiority from 'Others'. In Figure 7.11, the magazine seemingly undermines myths of the large penis and sexual virility (the large, swollen penis is emasculated), yet the visual image that is chosen and the hyperbolic speech genres that are employed in the article fail to completely debunk such myths. The exaggerated, swollen penis enhances the objectification of the 'Other' as a 'freak, and the reader is positioned as observer rather than participant in the grotesque display. It also enhances the virility of the lad, who through objectification, resists identification with the emasculated image.



Moving from the penis emasculated through swelling and deformity, a further way in which the penis is emasculated in the culture of *FHM* is as a penetrable object.

Figure 7.12 <sup>25</sup>



The above image appeared in *FHM.com*'s 'House of Horrors' and did not involve space for commentary from the readers of *FHM.com*. Instead, *FHM.com* frame the image with the title 'Forbidden Fruit'. The smooth, shaven body and the insertion of an apple into the penis feminize the image, not least because of the biblical allusion that the apple offers in relation to Eve and the Garden of Eden (the title 'Forbidden Fruit' makes this link explicit). In Figure 7.12, the insertion of the apple into the penis distorts its shape and potency, making it appear almost vaginal. However, there is also ambiguity and contradiction with these terms, and by inserting an apple into his penis, the man in the image is also positioned as a rebel. While the image above is emasculated and objectified (through both penetration and framing), it is also

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<sup>25</sup> *FHM.Com*, 'House of Horrors: 'Forbidden Fruit'', accessed 30.06.03. Photographer unknown.



controlled and temporary, and the display of this ‘party-trick’ marks it as a grotesque performance. Photographs of the grotesque penis in *FHM* are positioned as sexually non-functional, and once again, this image heightens the sexual virility of male spectators who can gaze curiously (and perhaps wince at the pain) of the emasculated, penetrable penis in the knowledge that they are sexually virile by comparison.

## Women, Sexuality and Monstrosity

As I suggested earlier, fat is a typical area of the grotesque that represents a radical break away from the smooth, toned classical image of the body. Fat is the also the one area of the grotesque in *FHM* where women feature as objects of humour and sexual monstrosity, although notably, never desire. Fat women are not a feature of *Men’s Health* and are not a source for grotesque humour. If we look at Figure 7.13 and Figure 7.14 (inserted below) we can see images of women whose fatness is used as a subject for humour on *FHM.com*, with their breasts and thighs being emphasised in ways that deem the women to be sexually horrific. The images in Figure 7.13 and Figure 7.14 were shown as video weblinks in *FHM.com*’s ‘House of Horrors’ during 2002 and 2003, with moving images reinforcing the sexual horror that engulfs the screen as a vision of excessive sexuality.<sup>26</sup> In Figure 7.13 and Figure 7.14 I have used website material in order to highlight the presence of the maternal grotesque in *FHM* culture, since maternal figures are a notable absence from the printed pages of *FHM* magazine.

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<sup>26</sup> The ‘House of Horrors’ was an integral feature of *FHM.com* that was subsequently renamed as ‘Dr. Freak’s Casebook’ during 2004. I discuss the relevance of ‘Dr. Freaks Casebook’ as a name that invokes medical/scientific discourses, and also the circus freak show, later in this chapter.



Figure 7.13<sup>27</sup>



The above image is called 'Dancing Fatties', and alongside the video stills *FHM.com* state,

Every man likes to cup a handful when caressing the fairer sex's norks, but imagine finding a piece of sweetcorn, or maybe a spicy chicken wing, tucked away in the recesses of a lady's flesh folds. Three women so large that such an eventuality becomes sadly all too likely, like the svelte curves of Destiny's Child reflected in a spoon, or distorted in some gaudy fairground mirror, these three dancing fatties possess funbags so huge they could usefully be employed to beat a small child to death.

(*FHM.Com*, 'House of Horrors: Dancing Fatties', accessed 25.02.02).

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<sup>27</sup> *FHM.Com*, 'House of Horrors: Dancing Fatties', accessed 25.02.02. Director unknown.



Figure 7.14<sup>28</sup>



The image in Figure 14 was called a 'Round of Applause', and *FHM.com* stated,

One of the advantages of being so fat, our lady friend explains, is that she can clap without using her hands. A commendable trick indeed, but can she wipe her own arse without a rag on a stick?

(*FHM.com*, 'House of Horrors: Round of Applause', accessed 06.02.03).

The association between fatness and food is not unusual, and the use of hyperbolic language such as 'finding a piece of sweetcorn' in 'the recesses of a lady's flesh folds' creates an enveloping image of greed and repulsion. The video clips of the women shown in Figure 7.13 and Figure 7.14 serve to render them as sexually horrific, with huge thighs and breasts being shaken to emphasise their difference to the sexually objectified slim models that offer a model of sexual attraction in the wider magazine

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<sup>28</sup> *FHM.com*, 'House of Horrors: Round of Applause', accessed 06.02.03. Director unknown.



culture. Indeed, *FHM* reinforces the distinction between the ‘beautiful’ and the grotesque in the comparison made between the ‘Dancing Fatties’ to the ‘svelte curves of Destiny’s Child’, (although, as I will discuss below, female models and celebrities can also be read as grotesque in the context of *FHM* and *FHM.com* through notions of hypersexuality). The invocation of death and childhood (‘funbags so huge they could [...] beat a small child to death’) directly rejects the maternal grotesque, and casts the women as figures of greed and as an embodiment of sexual monstrosity with large bouncing breasts and expressions of laughter. Similarly, the opening and closing thighs of the woman in Figure 7.14 creates an image of sexual monstrosity that threatens to envelop the masculinity of the lad who is positioned as spectator. The online environment *FHM.com* enhances the grotesque display of the women in Figure 7.13 and Figure 7.14 through the use of movement, yet the producers frame the displayed image with language that explicitly degrades the maternal bodies as images of sexual monstrosity.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva stated,

Fear of the Archaic mother turns out to be essentially a fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing. It is thus not surprising to see pollution rituals proliferating in societies where patrilineal power is poorly secured, as if the latter sought, by means of purification, a support against excessive matrilineality (Kristeva:1982:77).

The fear and disgust invoked by the monstrous women in Figure 7.13 and Figure 7.14 is purified through the framing of the images by humour. In lad’s magazines, humour produces a light-hearted environment, even where the subject of the



gaze/representation involves images of horror as we saw earlier with the *FHM* feature 'Problems: Emergency Ward'. However, a further way in which images of the maternal as monstrously grotesque are purified is through the representation of young, slim models that adorn the pages of *FHM* and *FHM.com* as objects of sexual desire. In her discussion of the monstrous feminine, the archaic mother and *vagina dentata* in the Hollywood film *Alien*, Barbara Creed analysed the positioning of Ripley (whose body is 'pleasurable and reassuring to look at') and the Alien who represents the archaic, castrating mother (Creed:1993:23). The two contrasts can be drawn between images of the fat, maternal monstrous feminine above and the bodies of slim covermodels that are featured on the covers of lads' magazines each month. However, in their positioning as hypersexual, women who are the objects of the male gaze ostensibly bite back and might also be seen to add to the grotesque repertoires of *FHM*.

Writers such as Imelda Whelehan have noted the increasing trend of celebrities adopting 'a porny pose for the lads', and young, slim, models form the central representational framework of *FHM* (Whelehan:2000:62). However, what has not been analysed is the potential for women models in *FHM* to be read as sexually grotesque. Women's bodies feature exclusively on the front cover of *FHM* every month in ways that enhance their sexual status in exaggerated (and often decontextualised) ways. When taking into consideration the fact that most covermodels are well-known models or television, music and movie stars, it raises



interesting questions about why women with cultural capital are eager to display their bodies in sexually exaggerated ways on the cover of lad's magazines.<sup>29</sup> Such models are upheld as beautiful and embody the sexual desire of heterosexual male readers whose sexuality is always tied to the female body. However, despite upholding standards of beauty, women models in *FHM* can be seen as simultaneously grotesque and form part of the wider grotesque framework of *FHM* as a grotesque text. In Chapter 6 I used the example of Jordan as an *FHM* cover model who displayed simultaneous beauty and excessive hypersexuality (shown through her stance, surgically enhanced breasts and overt sexuality in a decontextualised setting), and through hypersexuality her status as a sexual freak was presented as an aspect of *FHM*'s grotesque. Such models are portrayed in ways that position their bodies as hypersexual, and they employ exaggerated sexual characteristics that are thrust forward towards the reader's gaze. Women on the cover of *FHM* are phallic (with their long, smooth, toned bodies), and while they stand in contrast with the castrating maternal figures in Figure 7.13 and Figure 7.14, they similarly represent a threat to heterosexual masculinity. Yet their stance often adopts an aggressive tone that both accepts and deflects degradation back to the body of the spectator. Whilst objectified as sexually desirable by men, women on the cover of men's magazines, (particularly those who are cosmetically enhanced, display active sexuality and who hold celebrity credentials such as Jordan, Pamela Anderson or Jenna Jameson) are threatening, they disrupt the male gaze, and through their positioning as grotesque, assimilate power, even if that power is recuperated through discourses of sexuality that renders women complicit with heterosexual male

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<sup>29</sup> *FHM* is not the only example here, and it is a trend seen throughout lad's weekly and monthly titles such as *Nuts*, *Zoo*, *Loaded* or *Maxim*.



fantasy. However, in their decontextualised settings, images of hypersexual women are simultaneously portrayed as spectacle, rendering them as objectified sexual freaks.

## **The Grotesque as Ridicule: Excess, Cruelty and Prurient Humour in *FHM***

There are elements of *FHM* culture that might be read as modern day carnival, with the celebration of excessive behaviours, the materiality of the body and marketplace speech genres (that include jokes, hyperbole, cursing and mocking) providing links with Bakhtin's descriptions of the carnivalesque in *Rabelais and His World*. On the subject of marketplace speech, Bakhtin wrote,

Abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties are the unofficial elements of speech. They were and still are conceived as a breach of the established norms of verbal address; they refuse to conform to conventions, to etiquette, civility, respectability [...]. Such speech forms, liberated from norms, become themselves a peculiar argot and create a special collectivity, a group of people initiated in familiar intercourse, who are frank and free in expressing themselves verbally (Bakhtin:1984:187-188).

Billingsgate speech genres are frequently used in *FHM* and *FHM.com*. However, insults, cursing and mocking are most often initiated by journalists to frame a familiarised environment that lacks any real sense of dialogic interaction on an equal level. Nevertheless, as I will discuss in Chapter 8, readers who engage with the online environment of *FHM.com* often adopt billingsgate as a common form of interactive dialogue that positions readers in terms of familiarised conflict. Readers (lads) are positioned alongside journalists as 'mates', and in features such as the '*FHM* Arms', journalists are seen to engage in the beer drinking and womanising world of the lad. However, billingsgate speech and apparent 'irony' can also serve an implicit hierarchy



where grotesque ‘Others’ are positioned as spectacle and subjected to forms of scrutiny that use insults to enhance degrading forms of humour. The use of billingsgate as a ‘liberated’ speech form depends upon the context and framing of subjects and ‘Others’, and while it can be employed in grotesque ways by lads (or journalists who identify with lads) to simultaneously degrade and humiliate one another, the use of mockery and insults can serve to enhance the objectification of ‘Others’ (as we have seen in Figure 7.13 and Figure 7.14).

There are many excessive practices associated with ‘laddish’ behaviour and I would suggest that these are tied up with notions of the body as degraded and corruptible. For example, in an *FHM* article called ‘Sex Gimp Challenge’ we are presented with the photograph of a man described as an ‘ugly American’ dressed in underwear, sunglasses and fake moustache who is given the task of drinking his own sperm which is labelled ‘gogurt’, and the author states that ‘the feeling of having a load of my own sauce in my mouth is something I could never have been prepared for’ (*FHM*, ‘Sex Gimp Challenge’, June 2002: 87). If we take a look at two images from the ‘Sex Gimp Challenge’, we can see how the drinking of bodily fluids is framed as seedy, excessive, and arguably grotesque.



Figure 7.15<sup>30</sup>



In this article the 'ugly American' is not identifiable as a lad, although the body beneath the disguise can be read as one of the 'lads', since journalists who conduct pranks in the context of the magazine are positioned as interacting with lad culture. The type of excessive practice that is engaged with in this article (drinking one's own sperm) demonstrates the extremes of lad culture in viewing acts that transgress moral boundaries. However, sperm (a life giving force) and vomit also signify re-birth on an abject level. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin noted how urine and excrement were symbols of fertility that were associated with the grotesque, and stated, 'therefore in the images of urine and excrement is preserved the essential link with birth, fertility,

<sup>30</sup> *FHM*, 'Sex Gimp Challenge', June 2002: 87. Photography by Stephen R Cutri.



renewal, welfare. This positive element was still fully alive and clearly realised in the time of Rabelais' (Bakhtin:1984:148). The image of the 'Sex Gimp Challenge' is notably abject, however despite the regenerative symbolism, the act of drinking sperm positions the 'Ugly American' as humiliated and degraded in ways that simultaneously position him as 'Other'. Although sperm is a masculine image, the act of drinking sperm also transgresses heterosexual boundaries by indulging in an abject autoeroticism (the man also performs masturbation to obtain his sperm sample) that holds loose connection with male sexual intercourse (the man is having sex with himself, as a man).

The extreme practices engaged in by lads are often acts of apparently senseless entertainment that serve to bond homosocial spaces built around transgression of moral codes (yet usually within the boundaries of heterosexuality). *FHM* can also be read as part of a wider culture of cruel realism, where the lad is not so much a participant, but a spectator off-stage from which he can identify with the pain of the participant. For example, in the television programme *Jackass*, popular entertainment figures such as Johnny Knoxville or Steve-O display the hedonism of the lad, and are positioned as simultaneously attractive and grotesque through the extreme pranks that they conduct. Lad cultures explore limits, and indulge in activities that prove manhood through excessive behaviours, the capacity for endurance (without visible tears) and degradation. The construction of the lad embraces humiliation in an effort to induce humour, repulsion, courage and a sense of daring.



## Positioning the ‘Freak’ in the Culture of *FHM*

Where *FHM* places emphasis on the prurient, the bizarre and the absurd, *Men’s Health* functions through rejection of the grotesque. In contrast to *FHM*, the grotesque in *Men’s Health* lies dormant, and is controlled through the overt promotion of clean, disciplined and muscular male bodies. In *FHM*, the grotesque is celebrated as a form of entertainment, however representation of grotesque bodies hold a sinister side when the person in the frame is objectified and scrutinised for signs of difference that render them as ‘freaks’ of nature. In *FHM*, there is a distinct difference between lads (who endorse grotesque acts) and objectified ‘Others’ (who look physically grotesque without any corresponding sense of character or personality). Visual images of the grotesque often descend into freak show, and as we can see below in the synopsis for *FHM.com*’s ‘House of Horrors’ and ‘Dr.Freak’s Casebook’, the bodies of ‘Others’ are positioned as undesirable freaks in ways that invite comparisons between *FHM*, circus freak shows and medical/scientific discourses that display the ‘clinical gaze’. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault outlined the concept of the ‘clinical gaze’ as the medicalisation of the body in the medical search for knowledge that incited disciplining regimes of power (Foucault:1989) In *FHM.com* ‘freaks’ are grouped together under the above headings (‘House of Horrors’ and ‘Dr. Freak’s Casebook’), and paraded as spectacle for the entertainment of the reader who is positioned as a lad. While grotesque freaks are often presented in *FHM*, I have used material from *FHM.com* as a site that foregrounds grotesque display of the freak, and which adds punch to grotesque display in the grouping together of ‘Other’ bodies.



*FHM.com*'s 'House of Horrors' displayed a black, crackling screen, characteristic of early Twentieth Century cinema, and provided the reader with the following introduction,

The House of Horrors: Freaks, Fools and Foulness. Disappearing into the snowy horizon without so much as a jaunty click of the heels or a wave, the nippy end to Frankenstein's monster – a king amongst freaks – brought a tear to the eyes of even the hardest movie buffs.

For since the days when slaving crowds would hand-over their hard-earned pennies to gawk at the wispy foliage of the bearded lady or gape at the rubber man, the foul and the freakish has held a special place in our hearts.

It's unabashedly then, that *FHM.com* proudly presents The House of Horrors, a collection of some of the foulest and finest specimens of nature around. Saluting their uniqueness – and sighing at their ineptitude – the men, women and beasts of Freakdom are united here in a jaw-dropping special. From a penis-contorting Indian to a two-mouthed man, the assembled collective all succeed in one thing – making your stomach churn.

(*FHM.com*, 'House of Horrors', accessed 06.02.02).

In 2004, the 'House of Horrors' was replaced by 'Dr.Freak's Casebook'. Presenting similar material, 'Dr. Freak's Casebook' moved from using the horror movie genre and monsters as the framing discourse to medical science and the scrutiny of freaks as medical exhibits. In 'Dr.Freak's Casebook', *FHM.com* state,

Freaks fascinate and repulse in equal measure. Frequently kept away from society, they are dark family secrets that no-one wants you to know about; tortured souls who live in the shadows to avoid whispers and taunts of the unkind. Some, determined to deal with their uniqueness, demand your laughter. Others, whose defects are the result of reckless scientific tinkering, are a sobering reminder of man's inhumanity to man. The next time a strange yellow-headed spot appears on your forehead, spare a thought for the accursed oddities you are about to see. Because there, for the grace of God, go for all of us.

(*FHM.com*, 'Dr. Freak's Casebook', Accessed 23.12.04).



The photographs in the 'House of Horrors' and 'Dr. Freak's Casebook' are either knowingly (in cases where the person uses their grotesque talents as a source of entertainment) or unknowingly (as may be the case with images of disability) presented as spectacle for the entertainment of the *FHM* audience who correspondingly represent a space of difference to the image displayed. Using words such as 'monster', 'foul', 'freakish', 'specimens', 'freakdom' and 'repulse' differentiates the bodies contained in this section of the website as singularly undesirable and unique, negating the notion of the carnivalesque as a celebration of difference that provides ultimate inclusivity. *FHM* frequently incite carnival, circus, horror or medical imagery in their description of grotesque bodies. The label 'freak' creates hierarchy and positions readers as privileged in relation to the grotesque bodies of objectified 'Others'. The position of the reader and the 'freak' are opposing forces, and the viewing relationship can be said to represent '...a partitioning of space and a creation of discrete sidelines' (Russo:1994:38). There is no space for hierarchy or for the objectification of grotesque bodies as 'freaks' or 'spectacle' in Bakhtin's carnivalesque, and the ridicule that is directed towards 'freaks' is an example of negative humour, where meanings become unambiguously attached to difference as a form of spectacle.



## The Latent Grotesque, Bodybuilding and Monstrosity

*Men's Health* is not a professional bodybuilding title, and the producers of *Men's Health* adopt a critical stance towards the use of steroids in weight training.<sup>31</sup> As I discussed in Chapter 6, the ideal male body in *Men's Health* is athletically muscular and built on regulated fitness and weight training (and often the use of legal muscle building supplements such as creatine). However, as a culture that is obsessed with minute detail, and which supports the muscular sculpting of the body through diet and exercise regimes, bodybuilding runs latent throughout *Men's Health*. Furthermore, bodybuilders are evident in the online community of *menshealth.co.uk*, and many men engage in conversations on bodybuilding and weights training issues, including the use of steroids/muscle building supplements.<sup>32</sup>

The discussion of bodybuilding as part of wider repertoires of the grotesque might at first seem misplaced as a result of its links with physical power, discipline and the associated aesthetic standards of the classical male body (a Herculean figure). The practice of bodybuilding is highly regulated and rejects the materiality of the Bakhtinian grotesque where drinking, defecation, degradation and pleasure are upheld as practices involved in the carnivalesque. However, the excessive physiques and performances offered by professional bodybuilders also defy the boundaries of the idealized classical

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<sup>31</sup> Steroids are often associated with professional bodybuilding, although many professional bodybuilders would deny their use of them.

<sup>32</sup> For examples of such debates, see the following *menshealth.co.uk* message board posts: 'Steroids': 'European Junior Bodybuilding Competitions'; or 'Want to get a six-pack, but how?'



body through practices of over conformity and hypermasculinity. Read as grotesque, the bodybuilder physically transgresses boundaries, and with the aim of achieving a tight and symmetrical body, the bodies of professional bodybuilders transform into visual excess with muscle and bulk being achieved through the hypermasculine performance of weight training. It is through extreme dedication to disciplinary regimes and regulation that professional bodybuilders literally transform their bodies into displays of physical excess, and if they are read as grotesque in their embodiment of excess, then bodybuilders represent a real challenge to the sharp distinctions that are made between classical and grotesque bodies. In the expulsion of fat, bodybuilders perform abject desires, indeed bodybuilding is both a space of risk and abjection. Excessive weights training in the building of the body can cause health problems, and any associated use of anabolic steroids compounds the long-term health problems of bodybuilders who use such drugs to enhance body shape.

If anabolic steroids are taken as a potential aspect of the bodybuilding grotesque, the side effects of facial hair growth, loss of head hair, reduction of breast size all contribute to a more masculine image. Anabolic steroids are chemical compounds that produce male sex hormones and generate male sex characteristics. The populist associations between bodybuilding and the use of steroids is common knowledge, and men who engage in bodybuilding often prefer the look of bigger men, particularly on bodybuilding websites such as *thepumpingstation.com* or *bodybuilding.com*. In their research on the muscular male body, Harrison Pope, Katherine Phillips and Roberto



Olivardia state, 'our research has persuaded us that the male body simply cannot exceed a certain level of muscularity without the help of steroids or other chemicals' (Pope, Phillips and Olivardia:2000:35). The use of chemical substances (steroids or otherwise) is a factor that contributes to the grotesque, since they encourage an exaggerated body shape that pushes through the natural borders of the body, creating an image of monstrous hypermasculinity.

The protrusion of muscle and veins distorts the natural shape of the bodybuilder, and these internal forces grow to almost external proportions insofar as we can visibly see vein and muscle jutting out all over the body of competitive bodybuilders. While bodybuilders are working towards a Herculean image, the excessive growth of muscle pushes veins to bulge through the contours of the skin, producing physical effects that can be defined as grotesque. For example, if we look at Figure 7.16 (inserted on the next page), we can see how bulked muscle and protruding veins create an image of excess in the flexed arm of the bodybuilder.



Figure 7.16<sup>33</sup>



The above photograph was used by *Men's Health* in their article 'Think professional athletes are the only ones pumping up their bodies with steroids? Take a closer look at the guy next to you in the gym' (*Men's Health*, May 2003: 114-119). In Figure 7.16 the syringes and the protruding veins signify the use of steroids, and in this respect there is a link between steroid use and the production of excessively muscular bodies. *Men's Health* uses the vivid image of muscle, veins and syringes to invoke abjection into the chemically produced body as visually repulsive. In the article, journalist Christopher McDougall adopts a critical stance on the use of anabolic steroids, noting the negative effects that such drugs have on the body and the physical changes that are induced with

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<sup>33</sup> This photograph featured in 'Think Professional Athletes are the Only Ones Pumping their Bodies with Steroids? Take a Closer Look at the Guy Next to You at the Gym'. *Men's Health*, May 2003: 115. Photography by Monty Isom, Katz, Hulton Getty.



respect to skull size, skin tone, shoulders, chest, back, arms, abdominals, hands, knees, testicles and penis (*Men's Health*, May 2003: 117). Where the classical body is perceived as smooth and finished, the grotesque body is mutable and open to transgression. As outlined in Chapter 6, the classical bodies of Adonis and Hercules have traditionally been upheld as ideals of youthful beauty and strong, mature masculinity. However, as a hyper-masculine image, the Herculean body is subject to the grotesque when it achieves a certain level of muscularity that extends beyond natural boundaries and produces visible veins (where the inner body pushes outwards). The bodybuilder represents all that is disciplined and 'man-made', where traditionally the grotesque has been associated with lax discipline and nature.<sup>34</sup> For Bakhtin, the grotesque body transgresses smooth boundaries; it eats, drinks, defecates and in the process reinforces its relationship with nature and mortality (it is reborn through degradation). In contrast, the bodybuilder is on a highly regulated and restrictive diet and exercise regime in the attempt to defy nature through discipline and the control over every inch of muscle on the body. The bodybuilder is an image that complicates theories of the grotesque, as narcissism, disciplinary regimes and the use of chemical substances combine together to produce excessive bodies.

The use of anabolic steroids, as man-made drugs that produce masculine sex characteristics, produces powerful images of masculinity that create ambiguity between

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<sup>34</sup> Here I use the term man-made to refer to both the ways that bodybuilders sculpt their body shape, and also to the potential use of man-made muscle building compounds or drugs such as anabolic steroids.



the embodiment of physical power (whether or not the strength associated with the body is real) and a monstrous image that stands as an outsider (even in the gym culture of *Men's Health*). The image of the bodybuilder is not the only instance where the boundaries of narcissism and technology become confused with the grotesque. There are many examples of what we may call 'technologies of the grotesque' in cosmetic surgery where bodies become grotesque in an effort to achieve 'beauty', as is shown with the work of performance artists such as Orlan.<sup>35</sup> A further example of how technology produces the grotesque was seen in the life of Lolo Ferrari, a woman who underwent over 30 breast augmentations to achieve a 54G chest (Henley:2002). While women such as Lola Ferrari might just as well be read as tragic and manipulated, the independence of Orlan, who through her work claims to subvert aesthetic standards of beauty and create rebirth (via her work on the 'Reincarnation of Orlan') stand as a stark example of resistance and subversion to notions of the classical body. Furthermore, I highlighted above the notion of the sexual freak, and the display of hypersexuality in *FHM* is also often associated with cosmetic enhancement of the breasts.

Another example of how technologies contribute to the grotesque could be read alongside the hybrid bodies of cyborgs. The cyborg, as a vision of human and machine, is monstrous in its morphing with technology. Performance artists such as Stelarc, or Hollywood action villains/heroes such as *The Terminator* display

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<sup>35</sup> Orlan is a feminist performance artist who uses her body as a canvas in cosmetic surgery in her attempt to challenge western ideals of beauty. See 'Artwork: The Self Reincarnation of St. Orlan', <[www.orlan.net](http://www.orlan.net)> for more information on Orlan, surgery and performance art.



monstrosity in ways that trace ambiguity and embody difference. Ambiguity relates to contradiction, and in her teratological tracing of monsters, Rosi Braidotti stated, 'it is something which evokes both horror and fascination, aberration and adoration. It is simultaneously holy and hellish, sacred and profane. Again, the simultaneity of opposite effects is the trademark of the monstrous body' (Braidotti:1996:136).

Braidotti talks of the blurring of high and low cultures in the bodies of bodybuilders, and in this blurring, the bodybuilder lies between the classical and the grotesque. In her work on *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed described the clean, masculine birth fantasy in her analysis of *Alien* that contrasted to the bloodied mess of femininity. With bodybuilding we are faced with clean, disciplined, rigorous weight lifting routines and regulated dietary practices, yet the bodies produced create visual excess that disrupt the disciplined body. In her article 'The Bodybuilding Grotesque', the Canadian academic Krista Scott-Dixon examined how women bodybuilders become defined as grotesque from her own experience as a female bodybuilder. According to Scott-Dixon,

Male bodybuilders are regularly praised in muscle magazines for being monsters, term which, in context, carries positive connotations of superhuman size, strength and power [...] However to call a female bodybuilder a monster is an insult. It means that she has strayed into the territory of masculinity by attempting to claim a degree of strength, size and power as her own (Scott-Dixon, 'The Bodybuilding Grotesque', [www.stumptuous.com](http://www.stumptuous.com), accessed 14.03.02).

Bodybuilding becomes monstrous through notions of hypermasculinity, and although there are aspects of bodybuilding that have been read as feminised (with grooming practices and display of the body to be judged by others), these stand in contradiction with the simultaneous awareness that the body is also displayed as physically powerful.



In his essay, *What's Behind the Mask? Bodybuilding and Masculinity*, Thomas Johansson suggests that the regimes and practices involved in bodybuilding feminise the male body. Johansson states that, 'on the one hand, they represent hyper-masculinity, but on the other, their desire to display their bodies in public, becoming objects of the gaze of the Other, signifies a feminization of the male body' (Johansson:2003:93).

Similar to Johansson, Tony Jefferson also recognises bodybuilding as feminine practice when placed in comparison to boxing heroes such as Mike Tyson and claimed that, '...the idea that strength in the service of displayed beauty (the bodybuilder's muscles) is suspect because latently feminine; whereas beauty in the service of strength or courage (the boxing of Ali or Sugar Ray) is, by contrast, solidly masculine' (Jefferson:1998:84).

While practices such as tanning (for white bodybuilders), oiling and shaving the body so that it is bronzed, shiny and hair free could be read as feminizing practices, they are simultaneously built upon the display of masculinity that highlight the body as powerful, and are used in order to heighten the visibility of muscular definition. Muscle and power are at the forefront of professional bodybuilding. Bodybuilding is a profession that rests upon the male physique and conceptions of masculinity that are associated with bulk and physical strength. The basic bodybuilding shape relies upon heavily masculine codes, and we frequently see competitive women bodybuilders who have changed to a more 'masculine' shape through the build up of muscle mass and the reduction/hardening of breast size. Therefore, although the grooming and postures adopted in bodybuilding competitions might subvert traditional notions of masculinity and mark the body as spectacle and subject to the gaze, the bodies of bodybuilders are



also formed to aesthetic standards of the muscular body that is based upon perceptions of masculinity.

Although I have stated that professional bodybuilders do not figure in the visual framework of *Men's Health*, their bodies run latent in a culture that is centred upon the building of the body in minute detail. I have used bodybuilding as an example of the ways in which notions of the monstrous and the grotesque might be re-theorised to account for hypermasculinity. Where *Men's Health* is built upon discourses of fitness and exercise, bodybuilders or the building of the muscular body are not prominent aspects of the cultural framework of *FHM*. Instead discipline is mocked in *FHM*, and as we can see below in Figure 7.17, bodybuilding can also be cast as comically grotesque.



Figure 7.17 <sup>36</sup>



In Figure 7.17 we can see a photograph of a bodybuilding competition that was shown in *FHM*'s feature 'Problems'. This photograph provides an example of the ways that bodybuilding can perform as comically grotesque, using exaggerated smiles and the flexing of the upper body to enhance the size and shape of the shoulders, chest and arms in proportion to the waist. In the above image and through the caption 'Damn it, Bugs, get out of my pants!' *FHM* employ a comic and mocking tone, undermining the masculinity of the men in the photograph with implicit reference to (small) penis size.<sup>37</sup> There is no space given to the subject of bodybuilding in the undisciplined environment of *FHM*, and the above image is used for comic effect and contributes to

<sup>36</sup> This photograph featured in 'Problems: Because doctors just prescribe antibiotics and kick you back on the streets'. *FHM*, April 2003: 208. Photographer unknown.

<sup>37</sup> Alongside the diminutive image of 'bugs' *FHM* might also be read as alluding to the popular belief that steroid use decreases penis size.



the bizarre and comical framework of the magazine's visual photography, as well as the humiliating and insulting tone of lad culture.

## Conclusion

Both *FHM* and *Men's Health* demonstrate significant ambivalence/anxiety surrounding notions of excess and extremity. The grotesque images deconstructed in this chapter have been almost exclusively male, and this split corresponds with the visual material present in *FHM* and *Men's Health* where photographs of the abject and the grotesque use male bodies. The use of grotesque male bodies adds to the bravado of *FHM* as a male homosocial space, and while many images threaten the stability of the lad (as with images of wounds), the use of masculine codes to frame and position injured subjects as brave in the control of pain rejects the maternal in favour of exaggerated displays of hypermasculinity. While the maternal lingers within grotesque representations of the wounded male body, hypermasculinity is also displayed as grotesque in the ways that produce excess through notions of gore, heroism and 'hardness'.

In their respective works on women and the grotesque, Barbara Creed (1993) and Mary Russo (1994) suggested that women's bodies provide the most vivid examples of the grotesque. In her work on *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed stated, 'when male bodies become grotesque, they tend to take on characteristics associated with female bodies; in this instance man's body becomes grotesque because it is capable of



being penetrated (Creed:1993:19). While I will not deny the influence of the female grotesque, there are also associated practices that hold links with predominantly male cultures, and which are transformed as monstrous or grotesque with reference to hypermasculinity. In the context of men's lifestyle magazines, visions of hypermasculinity (such as physical power, hardness, beer drinking culture or sexual virility) are a clear site of reference in representations of the grotesque, using images of masculinity to bond a constructed community of heterosexual male readers. Images of grotesque male bodies are varied and complex, and in this chapter I have deconstructed photographs where the male body is positioned as grotesque in ways that range from the feminisation (of the emasculated penis) to images of hypermasculinity (through the bodybuilder), and also many images that hold deep ambiguity in searching for their origins (as with images of wounded men that are simultaneously vulnerable and brave).

Gendered practices are relevant to a reading of the grotesque, and excessive masculinity can produce bodies that not only look visually grotesque, but also perform as grotesque through acts such as drinking one's own body fluids or the use of hyperbolic language and billingsgate speech genres. In her work on the grotesque, Mary Russo outlined stunts and 'thrill-seeking' philobatism as 'grotesque performances', and while Creed used the example of stuntwoman Amelia Earhart as an image of resistance, the notion of grotesque performance has been influential to my



own understanding of how the grotesque can be linked to (sub)cultural practices. The idea of grotesque performance is also seen in Bakhtin's carnivalesque marketplace, the jokes, cursing, mocking and degradation of the material body that is evident in the carnivalesque hold some striking familiarity with *FHM*. However, while the lad engages in many forms of behaviour outlined as grotesque by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, a central question is whether the grotesque body creates a carnivalesque environment that is positive and regenerative, or whether *FHM* is necessarily negative, serving to enhance and reinforce difference as undesirable spectacle. In the objectification of 'Others' as grotesque spectacle, the production of the lad reinforces hierarchical distinctions, and while the lad participates in the 'carnival' of *FHM*, he does so on unequal terms that render him both a spectator and a potential participant with a critical and mocking voice. The carnivalesque potential for resistance to dominant mainstream cultures becomes appropriated through consumer cultures and the limits of the magazine in political terms. The lad embodies a position of perceived 'normality' in the context of the magazine (he can be well dressed, groomed and sexually active), is seen to uphold an implicit hierarchy in categorising 'Others' as 'freaks', yet also he engages with the grotesque through daring and mocking behaviours, extreme pranks and injuries caused through absurd accidents. The lad exists on the margins of the grotesque and contains contradiction as well as ambiguity.

*FHM* counterpoise two prominent grotesque gazes of extremity and excess: prurient monstrosity and the undisciplined, degraded body, and also idealized forms of the



sexual freak and 'hard' masculinity. In *Men's Health* the pleasures and transgression of the grotesque are repressed, and masculinities are defined through realism, discipline and the desire for idealized bodies. However the grotesque functions latent in this magazine and is central to the repositioning of the disciplined body. In Chapter 6 I discussed how the inner body was presented by *Men's Health* in ways that inspired a fear of morbidity and mortality, with the use of diagrams revealing cause and effect models of illness. In such models (a common feature of *Men's Health*, where diagrams are used to educate readers on the body), the grotesque potential of the body is denied expression, and while knowledge provides readers with power, it also sanitises the abject. Above I discussed how *Men's Health* discussed death and displayed the corpse in the article 'Dead Men's Tales'. This article displayed a rare and direct confrontation with the abject as a vision of horror, repulsion and disgust. In *Men's Health*, health and fear dominate the subversive potential of the grotesque, and discourses of health and fitness regulate the production of the body. Moving from images of the idealized and the grotesque I now turn to the third and final aspect of my research: men's online communities. The shift from printed magazines to internet based magazine websites is an underdeveloped area of research in the study of men's magazine cultures. Therefore I will examine how concepts of community are constructed and negotiated online, and will analyse how the cultures of *FHM.com* and *menshealth.co.uk* construct and negotiate notions of masculinity.



# Chapter 8

## Online Masculinities: Gender and Community in Men's Online Magazines

In this chapter I select website material from *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com* in order to analyse the negotiation between text and reader in the positioning of white heterosexual masculinities and online gendered communities.<sup>1</sup> Through non-participant observation and the use of conceptual tools offered by Bakhtin in his work on dialogism, speech genres and heteroglossia, I will analyse how male identified personae negotiate online identities and contribute to the construction of online male homosocial communities.<sup>2</sup> I examine the specific ways in which male personae communicate affective dialogues in *menshealth.co.uk* and investigate the communal desires and modes of (dis)connection on this site among men. While writers such as Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks have conducted focus group research on the readership of printed men's lifestyle magazines, academic research on men's online

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<sup>1</sup> The message board posts quoted in this chapter are selected using dialogues that appear in sequence (so as to provide logic of context) within part of a wider thread. I have not made use of the word 'sic' to indicate questionable readings as these would be too frequent, but all posts are exact quotations from the websites and all apparently odd or erroneous readings are in fact correct as posted. Word limits often prevent quoting whole message threads, as complete threads are frequently excessive in length. For example, one popular *menshealth.co.uk* thread titled 'THE six pack challenge...' ran for 34 web-pages with 333 replies (*menshealth.co.uk*, 'THE six pack challenge...', accessed 24.06.05). It must also be remembered that web-pages are significantly longer than printed A4 pages, and so to print whole threads would be unrealistic unless one decided to conduct a micro-level deconstruction of one or two long threads. This chapter, however, is intended to uncover a variety of themes that relate to the construction of heterosexual masculinity and communion. The extracts that I have selected highlight themes that are present throughout the sites. To see the complete threads please follow the URL links provided in the bibliography. See Chapter 5 for a broader discussion of the material selected for this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Unless stated otherwise, readers are identified as male personae.



magazines as a site for collective readership is new and the question of the role of this aspect of popular culture in the constitution of homosocial bonding has been undertheorised (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks:2001). The shift to online relations of reading has allowed readers to be complicit with the making of male homosocial communities, and the mix between publicly accessible websites and the display of emotion that is often seen on *menshealth.co.uk* creates interesting tensions. The interactive frameworks of online magazines have altered notions of community and reading relationships, and I will examine some of the ways that communities and collective readerships are formed below in the context of *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com*.

In this chapter I initially present a comparative summary of the two websites, including their mode of interactivity. My analysis of *menshealth.co.uk* then begins by examining affective dialogues for evidence of male investments in online homosocial communities that offer anonymity to male-identified participants. I explore similarities with feminist consciousness raising groups and the desire for communion with other male users. Through analysis of the positioning of 'Others' I explore the role of women and gay-identified men in the white heterosexual environment of *menshealth.co.uk*. My analysis of *FHM.com* begins by analysing the effects of *FHM.com* in foregrounding the grotesque and exploring ways in which lads are rendered as active, before examining ways in which billingsgate speech genres and deprecation are used to negate display of emotions. I progress by examining interactivity and women's bodies following the shift



in reading relations, and explore the use of women's bodies in interactive games, before concluding my analysis of *FHM.com* by reading ways in which men perform sex fantasies through women's bodies, and bond with other readers over the projected sites of desire. Finally, in this chapter I compare the conditions for heteroglossia in the two online magazine environments.

## ***Menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com*: A Comparative Overview**

While *menshealth.co.uk* is organised through a complex web of message boards that allow readers to fully participate in dialogic communities, *FHM.com* has a mode of interactivity closer to a collective monologue insofar as website material is produced largely by the magazine rather than interactively negotiated by readers. Consequently, the deconstruction of online speech in this chapter largely involves the website *menshealth.co.uk*, where concepts of 'brotherhood', affective discourses and intersubjective desire are clear thematic presences. This chapter can be distinguished from the work in the previous two chapters by its focus upon gendered communities (as distinct from heterosexual, white, male identities), the affective and emotional terms of relationality formed between male personae, and the relationships formed between heterosexual men and 'Others'; its focus on the interactive context of reading/writing (as opposed to more atomised readership practices in relation to (print) magazine consumption); and by its analysis of how the shifts in the modes of representation on each website resolve ambivalences in the printed magazines.



In *menshealth.co.uk* there are 47 message boards that are themselves each separated into sub-sections and all of which then fall under the six general headings of 'Fitness', 'Sex', 'Health', 'Looks', 'Sport' and 'Anything Else?' The vast majority of online participants identify themselves as heterosexual men, and from my research I have found that most of the issues raised for discussion relate to masculinities, the male body and/or heterosexual male fantasy (these subjects are discussed below). Women and gay personae also participate on message boards in *menshealth.co.uk*, posting most frequently on the boards labelled 'Women' and 'Sexuality' (both of which are located within the category of 'Sex'). The titles of these boards provide legitimate space for participation by women and gay men, although gay men do hold wider investments in the website with respect to discourses of fitness, health and fashion. I continue to discuss the roles that women and gay men play online in the context of *menshealth.co.uk* below, however here it is important to point out how the structure of *menhealth.co.uk* does not exclude outsider voices, and indeed, the positioning of 'Others' are significant in reading how men perform masculinity online.

*FHM.com* is split into 40 sections with a menu type structure that largely precludes interaction with other readers (unless one was to pay for access to online gambling in the 'Players Lounge' that boasts thousands of members worldwide). In contrast to *menshealth.co.uk*, *FHM.com* is primarily a visual website where audiences are provided with photographs, videos and games that position heterosexual men as the spectator of 'Others'. Therefore, in the discussion of *FHM.com* I focus upon the



significance of visual images, and analyse the speech genres used by magazine journalists to create the illusion of a truly interactive dialogic community. There is space for audience comment on *FHM.com*, however comments are limited (with imposed word limits) and the structuring of the website restricts and alters dialogic conversation and/or affective speech genres. The structure and content of *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com* highlights the radically divergent forms of these two types of interactive homosocial speech communities. In this chapter I now turn to offer separate readings of *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com* before moving to a comparative analysis on the space for heteroglossia and homosocial male communities.

### **Affective Dialogues in *menshealth.co.uk***

Affective dialogues by, and between, male identified participants are common everyday occurrences on *menshealth.co.uk*, and the space for the discussion of emotional issues is a distinguishing feature of *menshealth.co.uk* as a website. In affective dialogues, male personae request advice or raise debates on issues that range from dissatisfaction with bodily appearance, to concerns regarding health and personal relationships. There are also a variety of strategies employed in response to displays of male emotions, with participants using speech genres that relate to compassion, irony, indifference or ‘no nonsense’ approaches that advocate the discipline produced in the wider culture. Many of the emotional subjects raised disrupt traditional notions of an unemotional macho masculinity, and some reveal points of tension in the ways that masculinities are produced as disciplined by *Men’s Health* magazine.



In *Telling Sexual Stories*, Ken Plummer followed women's stories of rape and highlighted how such narratives had shifted from being the domain of men (in medical scientific discourse) to stories of survival and resistance from women in autobiography and consciousness raising groups. Plummer stated that,

The narrative comes to assume a fundamentally different form: the story becomes one of power and gender rather than sex and desire. It was a story of women's lives under male power and regulation rather than a story of male sexual release and woman's provocation. The stories of rape—whilst full of variety—fundamentally shifted (Plummer:1995:67).

I have cited the example of rape stories here to provide a comparison with men and emotional dialogues, and how the shift to online men's magazine message boards has opened up an arena for men to discuss emotions and anxieties that have traditionally been considered 'unmasculine'. Online we can read of men who have been raped, abused or who have eating disorders, subjects that are often hidden in society or are perceived as women's issues.<sup>3</sup> In this respect the online message boards of *menshealth.co.uk* show some generic similarity to women's problem pages in women's magazines, however the structuring of *menshealth.co.uk* message boards allow intersubjective negotiations between readers that are not restricted by word limits. The potentially anonymous space of *menshealth.co.uk* message board conversations are the central aspect of interactivity on the website, and in order to initially demonstrate the intensity of emotional dialogues online I now quote at length one post submitted to the

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<sup>3</sup> See *menshealth.co.uk* message board posts such as 'Am I Bulimic?' <<http://www.menshealth.co.uk/talk/thread.phtml/thread98521/page1/>> Accessed 11.01.02, or 'Abused as a child, needing advice' <<http://www.menshealth.co.uk/talk/thread.phtml/post488906/#488906>> Accessed 08.08.01, for two of many examples.



*menshealth.co.uk* 'Sex' board under the subheading 'Relationships' called 'So much pain!!!'

I have been married for just over a year and I have a little boy who is also a year old. The beginning of December I found out my wife had taken out a large money loan from the bank without discussing it with me. We had a massive argument and but in the end everything was ok. The following week my wife went out with her work friends and came home really late I asked her who dropped her home and she told me it was a work friend (who I never knew and I knew all her work friends). She acted really unusual and weird and I asked what was going on and she said she had been smoking (she never has smoked). That weekend I felt very upset I felt there was something wrong. The following monday she stopped wearing the wedding ring and I felt even more worried and upset. Then the Tuesday I begged her to wear the wedding ring and she said ok. I took her to work and later that day I arrived at her work place with flowers and tried to prove to her how much I love her. She wanted me out of the building and I asked her if she was wearing the wedding ring she told me that she wasn't wearing it and that she was confused!

Later that day I picked her up from work and she told me that she wanted space. I was devastated. I moved into my mum and dad's house and she dropped some of my stuff over.

A few weeks went by I felt that there was more to it than that. I went round to the house and she was acting strange, she told me she was happier without me and that it was over....I was so upset I cried I beg her to give me another chance. We talked and she said she wanted more time.

Then on the 23rd of December she said it was over, and that there was no one else she just wanted to concentrate on my son and her course that she was studying. I didn't know what to do...we agreed to spend Christmas eve together in separate rooms and I would get to spend Christmas with my son ( we lived with her parents by the way). So Christmas eve I go round there and my wife acts like she didn't want me there she had taken all my pictures down she didn't want me in the bedroom (which was our bedroom I paid for the bed). She went out with her mum and I looked after my son and her father was there as well.

After the way she acted I knew there was more to it than that....I just had to prove it. So I went through cupboards in the bedroom and found the morning after pill. I knew that she had slept with someone else it was dated for that day on the box. I was so hurt, shocked, I cried so much.

She came back and I confronted her in front of her parents...and she got upset and ran into the bathroom. About ten minutes later she came out and told me that it was a fling with a guy from college where she was doing her course and that it was a one off. And that he was good to talk to. I said that I was willing to forgive her and that we could make a fresh start she said she didn't know.

So Christmas day came and I wanted to concentrate on my son. I gave my wife all



her presents and she didn't seem interested. Later that day she told me she wanted a divorce and that if I divorced her on adultery that she would never speak to me again and I would never get to see my little boy I felt so sick and I didn't understand any of it.

I agreed to separate in the new year even though I wanted to work at it.

Then on my sons birthday I catch her coming home at 4am in the morning and I confronted her and she confessed that she was seeing the guy from work (who dropped her off) and that there was no guy from college. She said that he loves her and she has feelings for him..I if I loved her I would let her go. She also told me that she had been taking my son to the other guys place and that killed me.

Since then I only get to see my son at weekends, me and my wife hardly speak now. I still love her so much and I want to work things out but she is still seeing the other guy. I feel so much pain I had to go for an AIDS test because I don't know when it started. I have trouble sleeping I feel sick thinking about it. I miss not seeing my little boy everyday...I don't know if I should divorce her if so on what grounds....all my friends have been so supportive she has cut off contact with all my friends..I feel that its all my fault that she did it because of me that I wasn't good enough. I feel so betrayed!!!!!!

Please help!!!!!!

Heartbroken!

(*menshealth.co.uk*, 'So much pain!!!', accessed 17.04.02).

Many writers have reflected upon the apparent crisis in contemporary masculinity, and have outlined how men face increased emotional and physical pressures as a direct result of traditional notions of masculinity and 'manhood'. In Chapter 4, I outlined how writers such as Harry Brod and Victor Seidler have discussed how men lack emotional engagement, and many writers have expressed the notion of a masculine 'crisis', claiming that the effects of repressing emotion have both physical and mental repercussions for men (Brod:1987b, Seidler:1994, Horrocks:1995, Kimmel:1996, Faludi:2000, Clare:2000). Yet in the above post, the writer seeks homosocial



connection through his vulnerability ('devastated', 'so upset' 'so hurt, shocked', 'I cried so much' 'I felt so sick', 'I feel so much pain', 'I feel sick' and 'I feel so betrayed!!!!!!'), articulating states of mind not traditionally associated with heterosexual masculinity and conceptions of 'manhood'. In the writer's description of events, traditional gender roles are reversed with respect to the outpouring of emotion. As regards ways in which the above dialogue reflects on conceptions of masculinity and male community, the reader demonstrates a desire for communion through shared experiences ('Please help!!!!!!'). In this there is also an abject plea against loneliness, and the fact that the writer has turned to a male message board for advice despite having the support of his friends in the physical world is significant in demonstrating the importance of the anonymous spaces of *menshealth.co.uk* in facilitating modes of talking that generally are not part of the idiom of homosociality. The post illustrates that men desire communion with other men and value the support networks offered by (predominantly) male personae through the message boards on *menshealth.co.uk*.

The internet environment requires researchers to revisit reading relations as online magazines such as *menshealth.co.uk* represent interactive, communal spaces, that reconfigure notions of the public and the private. While the internet is a public domain and the message boards of *menshealth.co.uk* are easily accessible to computer network users, the dialogues submitted by men reveal intimate emotions that would often be hidden or private. To demonstrate some of the diverse ways in which writers identified as male personae communicate, respond and relate to emotive subjects of



conversation, I quote extensively below from a thread that was posted on the *menshealth.co.uk* 'Fitness' board in 2004 called 'Dealing with unattractiveness'. In this particular thread different forms of speech genres are employed to console male writers, from compassionate speech to no nonsense advice on self-help. The subject of the thread links to some of the issues discussed in Chapter 6 and men who fail to live up to idealized standards of the muscular male body.

**Writer A**

Ok guys - I now need some spiritual advice.

After trying for years to get my body back to look as I want I have run out of patience, and, frankly, energy and commitment. To keep worrying about how unhappy I am with how I look is exhausting and therefore request some advice on how to deal with or 'pocket' this emotion but carry on without it affecting me too much.

Anybody been or got any advice? By the way I am not returning to gyms - I am thoroughly sick of them - so spiritual guidance only if you have any!

**Writer B**

I could tell you that beauty is only skin deep and that what is important is that someone is beautiful on the inside but thats a load of kack and you know it. Get your ass down the gym.

**Writer C**

don't put yourself down mate, unless you look like Chewbacca then you aint got to worry

**Writer D**

I would advise you to understand you have tried and done your best. If there are still parts you are unhappy with then understand you know that but have done what you can to change and that is enough.

You only have one body at some point you have to learn to accept it as it is. As juvenile and childish as that advice seems, at some point you may just have to hold you hands up and say "This is me!"

**Writer E**

i was un-happy, real un-happy with the way i looked so i did something about it. The problem was me being fat so i removed the problem by becoming slim, wasnt easy but 4 months later im happy.

You can be as spiritual as you want but at the end of the day you have a problem and the only way to deal with it would be to remove it from the equation or lessen it to an extent that you became happy again.



As for accepting the way you look, nah thats not right. Everyone has the ability to do something unless its medically/financially impossible, if its weight then lose some, it aint rocket science, eat less and exercise and get some self disipline. If its facial features then losing weight might bring out a slightly different look, get a tan, change of image, smile etc but this falls under the medically/financialy impossible criteria.

Its common sense.

(*menshealth.co.uk*, 'Dealing with unattractiveness', accessed 23.11.04).

The original participant, Writer A, identified himself as 'Anon', preferring not to engage with the website by subscribing to a username. Anonymity lends itself to emotive dialogues and is often used in instances where the topic of conversation is particularly sensitive or controversial. Opting for the security of posting under the username 'anon' or 'anonymous' is interesting in an online message board environment that is already anonymous, (although the writer might be a regular participant who desires anonymity from other readers online). The name anonymous is part of a particular tradition of emotional or confessional speech genres such as the problem page, therapeutic spaces (such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Emotions Anonymous), or the church confessional box.<sup>4</sup> Being anonymous is an important aspect of *menshealth.co.uk* for many writers, and the option to post as 'Anon' further defines the message boards of *menshealth.co.uk* as a private space within a public, homosocial domain. Having said this, it is important to clarify that, as with any space that permits diversity, there are also readers who make explicit links to their lives

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<sup>4</sup> Both Alcoholics Anonymous and Emotions Anonymous are self-help groups run for alcoholics who require help, advice and support in overcoming their addiction to alcohol. While these two groups are not strictly anonymous, I have used them as examples of how therapies are conceived and named as anonymous spaces for emotional dialogues.



outside of the internet (with photographs and completed personal profiles) and those who use *menshealth.co.uk* as a space to make friends on an interpersonal level (through social meets and gym buddies).

In the first post by Writer A, the writer is distraught at being unable to live up to idealized standards and has resorted to asking for ‘spiritual guidance’ on how to ‘pocket’ his emotions. This is supportive of Harry Brod’s claim that male sex roles and the lack of space given for men to express emotional sensitivity are damaging for men both mentally and physically (Brod:1987b). The vulnerability shown by Writer A does produce an affective response from Writer C (‘don’t put yourself down mate’) but his compassion stands in contrast to Writer B and Writer E whose responses work against conceptions of spirituality in support of a culture defined by physical attractiveness and self-discipline. Writer B employs direct, authoritarian speech (‘that’s a load of kack and you know it’) in his reply to Writer A’s anguish, while Writer E provides a more detailed, anecdotal account of his personal experience of overcoming problems with self-help and determination (‘eat less and exercise and get some self-discipline’). As we have seen in Chapter 6, notions of hegemonic masculinity that are built around the strong, disciplined body are a central aspect of *Men’s Health* magazine, and in the above dialogues we can see how they lie implicit in the responses by Writer B and Writer E. While there are mixed responses to Writer A’s original post, demonstrating both compassion and insensitivity, the sympathy offered refuses to undermine the benefits of gym culture and self-improvement. Authority is communicated through



fitness and self-help, and we can see this especially in Writer B's and Writer E's dialogues that flatly state that the reader should get his 'ass down the gym' and that self-discipline and self-help 'aint rocket science'. There is a large investment in fitness and exercise culture in *Men's Health*, and the responses quoted above suggest that while the space provided by *menshealth.co.uk* allows men to communicate emotions with expectations of feedback from other users, fitness culture can also prevent communion and understanding.

However, fitness culture is often a site for male bonding on *menshealth.co.uk*, and threads on the 'Fitness' message boards demonstrate homosocial bonding in different ways to dialogues of emotion. In the discussion of fitness, men employ distinctive forms of speech, incorporating factual statements with comments on overall progress, statistics (such as the amount of weights lifted or of body weight) and goals. For example, on a message board on the 'Skinny Man's Bulk-Up Challenge!!' the following dialogue took place,

**Writer F**

Has someone ever said to you "I may be one or two pounds underweight, but YOU are summin' else!" ?

Are you trying to gain weight but it seems like everything around you is geared towards losing it?

You're not alone!

Introducing the all noo, and it is noo, Skinny Man's Bulk-Up Challenge! In a similar vein to The Six Pack Challenge, everyone who's trying to gain weight can use this thread to monitor their progress, and get the motivation from others that they need 'to-help-turn-their-tragic-life-around.'

So if you are trying to gain weight, please post your current weight and target weight



and also your current workout routine and even diet if you want, and then we can all encourage each other and share advice.

I'm in the process of sorting out a new routine so I'll post that up soon, but in the mean time:

Current Weight: 11 stone 1 lb

Target Weight: 12 stone

Would like to be able to achieve this in 10 weeks, not sure how realistic this is but I'll give it a go! Will be on creatine and protein supplements on top of my regular diet too.

Please get on-board for this challenge!

### **Writer G**

Sounds like a good idea to monitor everyones progress, it would be interesting to see how much weight other people are gaining.

Are you trying to gain muscle weight, or just weight in general. I reckon nearly a whole stone in 10 weeks would be quite a challenge. I am exactly the same weight as yourself, so i will give it a go to.

My workout is as follows.

Monday - bench press/dip

Lat Pull down/pull up

Military Press

Shrugs

Friday - Squat

Deadlift

Calf work

Crunches

### **Writer H**

Here you go [Writer F] you can have 6 of my best lbs free for nothing

(*menshealth.co.uk*, 'Skinny Man's Bulk-Up Challenge!!', accessed 19.01.05).

The dialogue selected above is a typical example of the speech patterns employed in message board threads on fitness. The speech communities on *menshealth.co.uk* draw upon a range of speech genres, and here we can see how Writer F starts the thread by directly addressing a collective readership through inclusive language that engages with



discourses of fitness and exercise. Unlike the emotional dialogues quoted earlier, Writer F's tone is confident, and male bonding is organized around motivational statements such as 'we can all encourage each other' in ways that empower men. There is no explicit call for brotherhood (as with dialogues below), however the space is clearly defined as male, with the language reflecting male fitness culture through words such as 'man' and 'bulk-up', and references to 'workout' routines that involve the use of creatine and heavy weights lifting. The specialized vocabulary of gym culture not only serves to bond men into a community of collective readers, but is also seen as a way to empower men and enable them 'to-help-turn-their-tragic-life-around'. With respect to community, there is an explicit desire for homosocial bonding through phrases such as 'You're not alone!' and the thread acts to carve a space for a smaller, more focused community within the larger community of *menshealth.co.uk* by inviting readers to take up the challenge and to report back to one another. The above three extracts illustrate how the shift to online versions of men's lifestyle magazines have created collective readership(s) and interactive communal spaces in which men use the anonymous spaces of message boards to express desire for communion through shared experiences with other men. I shall now investigate the collective reading/writing of participants on *menshealth.co.uk* in relation to notions of brotherhood, shared homosocial spaces, and gendered discussion of embodied experiences.



## Men and Brotherhood in *menshealth.co.uk*

During my time researching *menshealth.co.uk* there have been direct calls for homosocial spaces that use notions of brotherhood in ways reminiscent of feminist consciousness raising groups (hereafter cited as CR) of the 1960s and 1970s. In Chapter 4, I outlined how feminist CR groups arose as a result of second wave feminism's emphasis on the personal being political, and were set up as a political strategy to allow women a safe space to share everyday experiences, to bond as a gendered community, and to understand how their everyday experiences of oppression related to wider patriarchal structures. As Susan Hawthorne states,

With the arrival of feminism in my life came, finally, a language, words with which to understand on another, shared talk in consciousness raising groups that allowed us to arrange the patterns of our lives into political shapes (Hawthorne:1996:483).

This section of my analysis is not intended to provide a comparative analysis between feminist CR and calls for collective brotherhood on *menshealth.co.uk*. Indeed, the intersubjective desire for homosocial communities on *menshealth.co.uk* does not outline a political strategy for men. However, there are some similarities in the idea of shared homosocial spaces that discuss the embodied experiences in terms of gender, and CR modes of talking are generally not thought of as part of the idiom of homosociality. In the first two dialogues quoted ('So much pain!!!' and 'Dealing with unattractiveness') participants were seen to engage with private emotions that cast *menshealth.co.uk* as a safe space where participants can ask a community of predominantly male personae to focus upon common experiences as men and to ask for advice on their own positioning as men.



The dialogues on brotherhood that I analyse below do not explicitly call for political unity as men, however there is a desire expressed for the protection of male spaces. I therefore examine some of the strategies used to convey the desire for homosocial bonding, and will offer a reading of how online communities in *menshealth.co.uk* construct gender as a community issue. As a dialogic space where users can actively participate in conversations, *menshealth.co.uk* allows men to build friendships and acquaintances online, and we can often see such relationships transcend the boundaries of the internet through real life social ‘meets’ or ‘gym buddies’. However, set in the context of the internet, online magazines have created new forms of interaction between men that allow homosocial bonding on many levels, and that have permitted new forms of intimacy through emotional dialogues and the space for interactive anonymity. Theories of homosociality can be extended by empirical research of online communities as collective readerships organized around affective desire and expressing itself in forms reminiscent of CR groups.

On a message board ‘Anything Else: Chatting’ three participants to *menshealth.co.uk* wrote the following posts to a thread called ‘I have posted on handbag’.<sup>5</sup>

**Writer A**

One of the great things about this site is that guys can come on and talk about things they never imagined they could. They feel free to discuss issues they couldn't possibly strike up in a pub with their mates. And perhaps, more importantly, they can call for advice on things which have been plaguing them: everything from a failed relationship, to a bizarre spot on their penis. And one of the nicest things to see on

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<sup>5</sup> In the context of this thread ‘handbag’ refers to the popular women’s website *www.handbag.com*.



here is the brotherhood that's become the members of Men's Health and the support network which appears to be growing in strength.

More recently, however, the site has gained a number of women posters. And that worries me. It's not because I'm sexist, or because I don't think women have a valuable part to play, but it gets away from the ethos of Men's Health. And there's a silently growing minority of people who are getting a little tired of seeing some of the discussion forums becoming little more than a verbal orgy of flirting and innuendo. There's also the concern that the number of men who feel comfortable with posting up issues/problems etc will decline as many will just worry that they may become a laughing stock for the chattering classes and women who simply want to have a good snigger at the boards.

It's only to be expected that a website in which, in part, men post pictures of their torsos and talk about the size of their manhoods is likely to attract female attention. I'm in no doubt that if one of the women's monthly launched the "increase the size of your breasts challenge" and invited readers to post before and after pictures that the boards would be full of male voyeurs.

A women's website in which debate rages with cackles of laughter about this one - if that's what you're saying - is nothing other than sad really.

Maybe now one understand why some websites, which include chat forums, have started to charge a fee for subscription.

#### **Writer B**

I guess you weren't a regular user of MH in the days of old when there was continual flirting and banter with the opposite sex??

I am sorry to say that your post was in no way a discussion about HB but about the fact of trying to keep MH for purely men.. something which I am dead against.

Mens Health does allow guys to post about their problems.. which is great.. but what is also great is that there are women here who can help us and guide us in the right direction when we need and ask for it. I for one have had advice from LL in the past (years ago) and I certainly didn't object to it then or now.<sup>6</sup>

I find the fact that you appear to post here yet didn't log in to an account rather disturbing, why was that? Why not post with your normal account (or have you just been lazy and not bothered getting one?).

I have no problem discussing problems I have here.. be there just male or female posters.. after all who cares really what sex the person is who is replying if the reply is worth hearing from?

#### **Writer C**

I agree with what [Writer A] said to some extent, but [Writer B] is right when it says if advice is good it doesn't matter who has said it. It's a tricky thing because while I do

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<sup>6</sup> LL is an abbreviation that refers to a female-identified personae who regularly contributes to the message boards.



think the MH boards should be primarily by MEN and for MEN, that does not mean women should not be allowed at all, or somehow kept in check.

I just think that although it would be good to have a Men's forum where they can say anything without fear of female reprisal, in practice it is not possible and hopefully the women who post on here are not like that anyway. I think the women are in the minority on here anyway, if there became a point where there were more women posters than men I think it would need to be looked at, as the Anon said it would be getting away from the ethos of MH being a male-oriented domain. Would be interested to hear [the online editor's] input on this!

(*menshealth.co.uk*, 'I have posted on handbag', accessed 02.09.04).

The diversity of opinion quoted above, with both consensual and conflicting ideas on the role of women in *menshealth.co.uk* demonstrates heteroglossia in the structuring of the *menshealth.co.uk* message boards (I elaborate on this idea later in the chapter).

These posts also reveal one of the ways in which meanings are negotiated intersubjectively. In the debate regarding female participation on *menshealth.co.uk*, tensions are articulated as gendered, and men are positioned as distinct from women physically, mentally, and also in terms of community investment. In the post by Writer A (and supported by Writer C), male bonding is imagined as an ideal space for the discussion of communal discourses between men on subjects relating to their embodied experiences in everyday life. Furthermore, according to Writer A, the participation of women undermines male bonding and turns dialogue into 'a verbal orgy of flirting and innuendo'. The post from Writer A is not expressed explicitly in political terms as CR, however references to a 'brotherhood' that 'appears to be growing in strength' can implicitly be read as political in defining male-only spaces. There is importance placed upon *menshealth.co.uk* as an interactive homosocial



speech community in the lives of male-identified personae, and in Writer A's dialogue we can see how it is not just homosocial bonding which is important, but *online* homosocial space, with the online environment being seen as conducive to forms of dialogue that cannot be approached 'in a pub with their mates'. The interactive context of collectively reading/writing a message board thread allows access to private emotions that are difficult to approach with gendered communities in the physical world, and while there is no guarantee of support in the online environment, it is a space where readers can reflect upon the process of identity both as an individual, but also as a part of a wider community of men. In this respect, *menshealth.co.uk* can be viewed as a site of resistance against dominating or stereotypical male identities.

## **The Positioning of 'Others' in *menshealth.co.uk***

### Women

It is not always possible to define the biological, social or cultural identities of readers in the online environment of *menshealth.co.uk* unless it is marked in speech, shown through photographs or given away through inconsistency of dialogue. As I suggested in Chapter 4, deception is a concern in online research that lacks face-to-face contact. However, gender is a normative defining characteristic in *menshealth.co.uk*, and participants frequently identify themselves as men or women. Women are positioned as 'Others' who help define men's relationship with each other and with a notional sense of community. On *menshealth.co.uk* there are users that express resentment for women's participation in the online community, as well as those who actively seek



women's opinions in message board threads such as 'Bisexuality – Women's Views', 'Need women's opinion about University' or 'Women's views on non-drinkers??' There are also male personae that claim gender is insignificant to the expression of opinions. There are many differing, complex views on the positioning of women in the wider community, however women remain a constant undercurrent and a point of tension in defining male communities as male spaces. The omniscience of gender in the construction of community in *menshealth.co.uk* positions women as an implicit (if not explicit) source of difference from which (hegemonic) masculinities are defined. For example, in Chapter 6 I outlined how women's bodies have been used figuratively by male personae who felt that their own bodies did not live up to idealized standards of masculinity, with notions of femininity being used to describe male bodies as weak or soft.

In the thread 'I have posted on handbag' quoted earlier, we saw how the initial participant described his resentment at women participating on the message boards of *menshealth.co.uk* in ways that introduced sexual flirting. Women's bodies are visualized through dialogue to construct sexual fantasies on the message boards of *menshealth.co.uk*, and I will now quote from a thread called 'Visualizing' in order to show how women's bodies are constructed as sexual objects by participants, and also to comment upon how such narratives construct the heterosexual environment of *menshealth.co.uk*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The name of the thread has been edited to exclude usernames and to respect online anonymity.



**Writer A**

"I could be as fat as a barrel with a wart on my face"...

I thought it might be fun to indulge in a bit of cyber-visualisation. No need to confirm or deny anything - it might just make [Writer B] laugh !!

Ok, I've got Long Legs as about 5'10" tall. Willowy figure, long legs obv, 36B. Age 43, long blonde hair. Style - smart- always manicured and made up. Very Chic -n not mutton dressed as... Very vivacious, laughs a lot, touchy feely. Instant sex appeal to any passing bloke - it will be in her eyes when she laughs.. Will flirt outrageously, but make it clear there only room for her DH in her life. An absolute sex bomb. Wears only classy lingerie - always stockings, never tights... I'll stop there, before I move into my fantasy!

Incidentally - my DW is all of the above, except brunette with shorter hair and I love every inch of her.

**Writer B**

Hi [Writer A],

I've just gone and replied in full to this on the 'Who are we' thread!

I'm not really sure why you've started this one, sweetheart, as I'm not that exciting a person to look at - just your average tall, blue-eyed brunette. I'm neither beautiful, nor ugly, for which I thank my parents wholeheartedly!

[Writer B] xx

**Writer B**

Hey folks, I'm certainly not 43 - not for some time in the future, anyway! I'm also neither blonde nor long haired - I've got the legs, though. I don't think I'll be 'willowy' for a while, but I can but hope!!

Has anyone come across [Writer A] since the new boards came out - I'm missing him!

[Writer B] xx

**Writer C**

works for a porn chat line.

**Writer B**

Oh yeah, you reckon, [Writer C]?

So why was he here in the recent past?!

**Writer B**

For all you guys, would you like to add to this thread? My 'pic' doesn't give much away, afterall?

(Just fishing for compliments/fantasies here, btw!!!)

[Writer B] xxx

**Writer D**

You're always fishing, darling...

Besides, I have a very clear picture of you...

;D

(*menshealth.co.uk*, 'Visualizing', accessed 02.06.05).



In the above thread we can see some examples of how flirtatious behaviour expresses itself through visualizing women's bodies. Writer A constructs a vivid fantasy that fragments the female body and uses it as a site to guide the dialogue, and similar techniques can be found in *FHM.com* where fantasy narratives are constructed through the projection of desire onto women's bodies (as will be discussed below). There is a complicit response from Writer B (the subject of Writer A's narrative), and her presence encourages the continuation of the fantasy constructed around her online personae. The investment that women hold in male dominated spaces such as *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com* is intriguing, and would prove an interesting project to expand upon in later research. However, in the context of constructions of heterosexual masculinity, sexual fantasy (termed 'a bit of cyber-visualisation' by Writer A) is constructed here as a heterosexual fantasy, and the above thread therefore explicitly contributes to creating the heterosexual environment of *menshealth.co.uk*. Gay writers can express sexuality in specifically dedicated threads on the subject under the topic of 'Sexuality', however they are not expected to signal such desire in general threads that might disrupt heterosexual stability. As we will see later in this chapter, when a gay user signals his desire for another male user, this is subsequently met with conflict from the (dis)connections of other message-board participants.

In Chapter 4, I discussed the potential of the online environment to allow creative identities in shared interactive spaces. However, while computer networks provide the space for sophisticated reflection on the construction of identity, there is no evidence



on the message boards of men's online lifestyle magazines of personae trying to break the mould on subjects such as masculinity and femininity. While the male body and conceptions of masculinity are central to websites such as *menshealth.co.uk*, the distinctions made between men and women maintain very traditional gender boundaries. While male personae question the positioning of men in British society, the status of masculinity is not challenged. Men's magazines such as *Men's Health* and *FHM* have a huge investment in maintaining gender distinctions, and gender is central to how identities are constructed by readers online. Therefore, as writers such as Ann Balsamo and Jodi O'Brien suggest, gender organises our social reality and in the context of *menshealth.co.uk* (and, as we will see below, in *FHM.com*) it is impossible to escape hegemonic concepts of gendered identity (Balsamo:1996, O'Brien:1999).

### Gay Men

Despite an acceptance of gay men in the wider community there are simultaneously some tensions expressed between heterosexual and homosexual men in the homosocial community of *menshealth.co.uk*. Although the message boards are structured so that discussion of gay sexuality most frequently remains in the parameters of the message board 'Sexuality', there are instances where homosexual identities and desires enter conversation on boards outside of this context. There is rarely explicit homophobia in the culture of *menshealth.co.uk*, yet implicit tension exists, and being 'gay' is used as a term of insult by some heterosexual participants. In a message board thread called 'New Men's Health' we can see how representations of



idealized male bodies and gay sexual desire sit uncomfortably with heterosexual readers of the magazine.

**Writer A**

My GF reads the cover (over and over again) I read the articles. Fair deal i think :)

**Writer B**

When mine popped through the door yesterday, my flatmate shouted upstairs

“B, your gay mag’s here”

arrgh! I’m not homophobic (and, because it clearly proves it :P one of my flatmates is gay) but is there any need for shirtlifters on the front of the mag? I keep getting funny looks!!

**Writer C**

I for one don't give a damn about the cover models. No offense to whatever braindead muscle guy they've got on the front cover this month (come on. I read the inside cover and then the article on the cover model. "Model and club promoter"? Please. Spare us.), but I'd rather read more about the results of actual readers rather than some pretty boy with the perfect sixpack who graces the cover every now and then. I can't even take this magazine into work without some snide comment made about the fact that I'm reading a fitness magazine with a cover that looks more like the cover of the latest edition of Gay Times or Attitude rather than one of the UK's better-known men's magazines. Would it kill Men's Health to put a female on the cover? Or how about a cover to do with one of the topics? If theres an article on, say, bodysurfing, why not a cover reflecting that? I know that putting such images of guys blessed with superior genetics that make them a, more facially attractive and b, more likely to develop a nicer physique than the 99% of human males can probably induce envy levels to increase all our desires to work harder at the gym - but I think its a bit dull. Lose the cover models and get a decent cover done for god's sake.

And whilst we're at it - can you \*please\* tell me just why it is that I need to be confronted with umpteen membership application forms for differing prices when I open the magazine up for the first time after securing it from the shelves in WH Smith? Hmm?

Thank you. Whinge over.

(*menshealth.co.uk*, ‘New Men’s Health’, accessed 21.12.04).

In the posts quoted above we can see the tension generated by representations of muscular male bodies on the cover of *Men’s Health* and anxieties created by



perceptions from other men that readers of *Men's Health* might be viewed as gay. The muscular male bodies of models on the front cover of *Men's Health* are recognized as attractive to women and to gay men, and in this thread it can be seen that there is no space for the projection of desire in terms of identification or admiration. Writer A acknowledges that his girlfriend finds the cover models attractive but declares that he only reads the articles, and Writer C feels the need to explicitly state his lack of interest regarding the cover model ('some pretty boy with the perfect sixpack'). Within this homosocial male space there are recurring tensions regarding desire and containment of desire towards other men. This is not to say that male readers of *Men's Health* do not identify with the bodies of cover models, and in *menshealth.co.uk* there are men who identify with such ideals, as well as those who express aspiration, disinterest or failure at living up to the projected cultural ideals of embodying muscular masculinity. In the above thread, Writer C also expresses a desire for a change in the marketing of *Men's Health* to standards that are more explicitly heterosexual, and in this respect gay men are positioned as outsiders to the wider culture. Writer C is defensive about the fact that he receives 'snide' comments about reading magazines for gay men when it is actually 'one of the UK's better-known men's magazines'. In contrast to Writer C's repudiation of desire for other men, Writer B approaches the subject of the male body and sexuality with a more light hearted tone. Yet at the same time he is aware of how his post could be deemed homophobic, hence the disclaimer that refers to the writer's gay flatmate. The use of quotation marks to position the writer's flatmate as the one who questions his sexuality demonstrates the use of double voiced discourse. Through double voiced discourse a writer can use distant speech to approach a subject that he



recognises as potentially controversial, deflecting conflict whilst voicing thoughts. The phrase 'shirtlifters' is also significant in the above message, as on one hand it literally describes the posture and action that the cover models of *Men's Health* adopt when they are photographed lifting up their shirts to reveal their torso. On the other hand, the phrase 'shirtlifter' is also a derogatory slang term for a gay man, maintaining an implicit hierarchy where gay sexuality is subject to disparagement. While explicitly declaring that he is not homophobic, Writer B's use of derogatory terms and open questioning of whether there is 'any need' for male bodies on the cover of the magazine again reveals the tensions verbalized towards homoerotic male bodies on the message-boards of *menshealth.co.uk*.

Readers of *menshealth.co.uk* are often aware of the ambiguous sexual codes that male cover models represent, and feel uncomfortable at the thought that they should be perceived as gay. While writers such as Susan Bordo highlighted how fashion houses such as Calvin Klein utilised the invisibility of macho gay male codes in mainstream culture to market the male body to heterosexual consumers, the shift to online readership has shown participants of *menshealth.co.uk* revealing increased awareness of the clash between macho gay codes and heterosexual masculinities (Bordo:1999). As one possible response to the ambiguous coding of the male body in advertising and men's magazines, users of *menshealth.co.uk* frequently and self-consciously justify their right to be concerned with physical appearance as heterosexual men, and often use



heavily masculine language such as being ‘bulked’, ‘built’ or ‘ripped’ to describe the male body as powerful in ways that deflect sexual desire.

Homosocial bonding is often difficult to maintain when the subject of discussion turns to gay sexual desire since many men are self-conscious and protective over their heterosexual status. We can see a similar pattern in the following thread on ‘THE Six Pack Challenge’ where the expression of gay sexual desire towards a photograph posted by another participant disrupts the flow of (implicitly heterosexual) male dialogue on a subject that treads the boundaries of homosocial desire and identification: the idealized muscular male body.

**Writer A**

The abs are perfect. I don't think you should be asking any of us for advice!  
Keep on doing what you do, mate. :-)

**Writer A**

Unless you're bragging, then I'd say that you have every right to brag.  
(Sorry, couldn't sleep tonight and it's three in the morn'... I'm a wee bit slow right now... :-P )

**Writer B**

Top of the abs are very good - the bottom could do with some work on them ;-)  
I would work on your pecs/shoulders and arms as these are a little skinny, but you are only 16, so you have time yet.

**Writer C**

Need to bulk ;-)

Seriously though... bulk! You have PLENTY of testosterone available at your age and for the next few years, so take advantage of it.

**Writer D**

I'd give you a right good seeing too...  
;-)  
Nice bodi man, very nice...  
you have what we all aspire to  
keep it up...(oor err)...



**Writer E**

Bearing in mind he's SIXTEEN, [Reader D]!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

**Writer D**

all legal these days...  
I know, I was teasing  
sorry if I offended anyone

**Writer E**

Legal or not [Reader D], be careful about what you say to impressionable minds! Try and stay on-topic please.:-)

**Writer D**

and who died and made you moderator...?  
if you look at EVERY post you will notice this happens all the time

now welcome to the boards...

and please don't try and Police the messages, you'll be shot down in flames...

And if you notice i did apologies

(*menshealth.co.uk*, 'THE Six Pack Challenge...', accessed 24.06.05).

'THE Six Pack Challenge' reveals how desire for the male body is a sensitive subject of conversation when such desire is expressed in sexual terms. The words 'I'd give you a right good seeing to' position the man who posted the photograph as a passive object of desire, and it is the objectification of the male body alongside the foregrounding of homosexuality that disrupts the flow of conversation. Homosexuality is located as deviant and 'off topic' by Writer E, although the fact that Writer D is able to argue his own case shows how *menshealth.co.uk* is not closed to conflicting perspectives. Many gay and bi-sexual men post on *menshealth.co.uk*, and while the subjects of gay sexuality and desire are not excluded in the construction of heterosexual masculinity and



homosocial communities, they are contained both through the structuring of message boards and through articulations of tension by heterosexual men. Writer E retaliates to protect the boundaries of what is not necessarily a heterosexual space, but a homosocial space for men who want to talk about and display their bodies without threatening articulations of sexual desire for male bodies. The expression of sexual desire towards male bodies is a point of tension in defining male communities as male spaces, and positions gay men, like women, as an implicit source of difference from which (hegemonic) masculinities are defined. The above posts again reveal that the boundaries of homosociality involve complex tensions around desire and the containment (sometimes repudiation) of desire for other men. Gay men are given a voice, (potentially a critical voice: 'don't try and Police the messages'), on *menshealth.co.uk*, and the positioning of gay men as 'Other' is implicit rather than explicit, existing as a constant undercurrent in the construction of online homosocial communities.

## **White Masculinity and Political Correctness in *menshealth.co.uk***

While gay participants are positioned as 'Other' to the heterosexual norm with respect to sexuality and the expression of sexual desire, the subjects of health, fitness and the male body are seen as relevant to men regardless of racial or sexual orientation (unless the boundaries of desire are transgressed as we have seen above). The concept of universality sidelines the issue of 'race', casting it as an irrelevant subject and therefore



contributing to its invisibility in online discussion. While openly hostile dialogues can be targeted towards women, open expressions of homophobia or racism are viewed as being particularly controversial, and can serve to split men and homosocial spaces for bonding. The racial or ethnic identities of *menshealth.co.uk* participants are rarely indicated in speech unless the subject of conversation requires knowledge of such identities through issues of racism or xenophobia. The invisibility of race in online discussion is in itself illustrative of the sensitivity of participants of the site to racial issues, however, some white men have started to express their concern at being rendered invisible. The topic of political correctness can be seen to provide a platform for questions of discrimination that move beyond black identities. I now turn to a discussion of whiteness through the subject of political correctness, and examine how white masculinities are positioned as a racial identity. In a message board thread called 'PC gone mad...' the following dialogue took place,

**Writer A**

i am a part time youth worker for essex county council.

i recently attended a equal ops workshop.

at the start we had to list groups that may be discriminated against. i like being a bit controversial so i said that white heterosexual males were discriminated against, didn't get much notice though.

however, someone else's idea of a minority group was 'terrorists' which was met with a lot of agreement.

is this pcness gone mad?

**Writer B**

I'd say its PC gone mad, but then there is nothing new there. This country (amongst others) is PC obsessive.



**Writer C**

Why is it always white males who moan about this?

**Writer D**

Because white males are among the most discriminated against groups in society. Sadly because we are positively discriminated against, there is nothing we can do about it. Naturally therefore we come on here and moan

**Writer A**

White hetero males are the bench mark that everyone other group is compared to.

sometimes i think life would have been easier if i had been born a mixed-race disabled lesbian, then i could use discrimination as an excuse for my failings instead of taking responsibility for my own life.

because i am a white heterosexual male that clearly can't be descriminated against i will take responsibility for myself and will have no one else to blame when i pick my new M3 BMW next month.

**Writer E**

I think calling terrorists a minority group is PC gone mad (TM Daily Mail) but I do think that 'PC gone mad' is often used as a lazy cop out when any progressive/controversial policies get mooted. Being honest with ourselves, white males have it bloody easy compared to pretty much any other section of society you'd care to mention.

And FWIW I think if more people, of any origin, showed your attitude in self determination and responsibility rather than whinging about what others are given, then society as a whole would be in a lot stronger position.

(*menshealth.co.uk*, 'PC gone mad...', accessed 09.03.04).<sup>8</sup>

Posts that raise the subject of political correctness represent an interesting area for the expression of white identities, and the ways in which white men might view their status in a broader social context. In the above quoted thread, Writer A uses some rather dramatic examples to outline the contemporary positioning of white heterosexual masculinities with respect to discrimination and political correctness. The invocation

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<sup>8</sup> 'FWIW' is a common abbreviation to indicate 'For What It's Worth'.



of 'terrorists' and 'black disabled lesbians' positions white heterosexual masculinity as a point of contrast, and despite claims for discrimination, there is also the underlying acknowledgement that white heterosexual masculinity is a position of privilege (Writer C complains of 'white males who moan', Writer D says white males are 'positively discriminated against', Writer A comments on his 'new M3 BMW' and Writer E states that 'white males have it bloody easy'). Through using the context of political correctness as the subject of debate, the (white) collective readership articulate their perceived invisibility. White men are aware of their position as raced, but the power of white masculinity remains implicit and there remains an apparent contradiction in the idea that white heterosexual men, as the 'benchmark' for society, are discriminated against.

In 'PC gone mad...' parallels are drawn between white men, 'terrorists' and mixed-raced disabled lesbians. While the popular media identifies terrorists as predominantly Asian men in the current political climate, the fact that the label terrorist is used not only creates dramatic effect, but also distances the issue of racial discrimination. The use of such extreme examples is one way to avoid direct controversy from groups who have access to the *menshealth.co.uk* community, particularly in an environment where discussions of racism are often met with heated controversy. Mixed-race disabled lesbians have no space for representation in the culture of *Men's Health*, and represent an easy target for comparison with no reciprocal voice. In his analysis of white masculinity, Brent Malin claimed that, '...dominant notions of identity are rehabilitated



through the abjection of some minority identity, reiterating the power of whiteness at the same time that they might seem to critique it (Malin:2003:252). In the above dialogue, mixed-race disabled lesbians represent an abject space, so that while white masculinity exists as the subject of debate, it is not an identity that is fully comfortable with being 'Othered'.

Male users of *menshealth.co.uk* often reveal emotional vulnerability, articulate the value of anonymous homosocial communities, call for male spaces and invoke notions of a brotherhood. They engage in complex relationships with 'Others' that help to define white heterosexual male identities individually and collectively. The shift to collective online readership has allowed the users of *menshealth.co.uk* to participate in the construction of (varying sized) communities that are based upon the needs and desires of men in heavily gendered ways. Gay and/or black male readers form part of the wider homosocial community, although there are tensions that are expressed between groups of men when boundaries are crossed with respect to racism or homosexual desire. Men on websites such as *menshealth.co.uk* reveal increased awareness of the clash of homoerotic and heterosexual codes in magazine cultures. For social researchers the online environment presents itself as a rich and dense place to understand some of the ways that men express masculinity both individually as and as part of a wider community. I turn now to a discussion of the website *FHM.com*, a website that offers very different ideas on heterosexual masculinities and homosocial communities. My discussion of *FHM.com* uses material that represents the



production of interactive space for readers. The grotesque is foregrounded in the visual structuring of the website *FHM.com*, and my work follows on from debates raised in Chapter 7 in examining how grotesque bodies are performed interactively in the shifting context of lads' magazines to the internet.

## **The Grotesque and Billingsgate Speech Genres in *FHM.com***

In *FHM*, the lad is set as a point of contrast to objectified 'Others', most notably, women and the grotesque. Yet as discussed in Chapter 7, the lad is also attached to conceptions of the grotesque through images of wounds that connote bravery and the ability to endure pain without expressive emotion. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the grotesque lad and the grotesque 'freak', with freaks most often being images of physically disabled or overweight men whose bodies are subjected to scrutiny and who are denied critical voices. As we have seen in Chapter 7, in *FHM.com*, the grotesque is pulled into the foreground to a greater extent than in the printed magazine. This is achieved in part through interactive visual software that enhances the size of images on the screen, and also as a result of the relatively smaller advertising space that demonstrates reluctance to place the idealised male body in the interactive frame.



Features in *FHM.com* such as 'Dr. Freak's Casebook' and 'MMS Gallery: Horror' distinguish between the grotesque bodies of freaks and lads, with the latter capturing injuries that readers have suffered in comparable ways to those in 'Problems: Emergency Ward' discussed in Chapter 7. In these two features there is a structuring of the grotesque that renders lads as active (encountering injury through activity) and 'freaks' as passive (having innate or incommensurate physical differences). In 'MMS Gallery: Horror' readers are able to submit brief comments in response to photographs of 'horror', most of which use cursing, criticism, irony and exclamations of disgust. Through such comments we can see how masculinities are positioned as being able to endure abuse, with billingsgate employed by readers to negate any display of emotions. For example, one participant submitted a photograph to 'MMS Gallery' that showed him lying on a hospital bed, with blood on his face (he had been in a fight that resulted in a glass bottle being smashed over his head), and with his arm flexed to display his muscular bicep (see Figure 8.1 on the next page).



Figure 8.1 <sup>9</sup>



The contributor who submitted the above provided the caption, ‘me tensing while on the operating table waiting for stitches after being bottled’, and the following comments were made to this remark by other online participants:

**Writer A**

Tensin wat. Oh wait.... i think i see it now. Ha ha ya got arms like pipe cleaners ha!

**Writer B**

he got bottled cus he'd not plucked his eyebrows!! there like fu\$kin caterpillars man.

**Writer C**

bet you werent so hard looking when you got your ass kicked. Fag

**Writer D**

sorry losers

**Writer E**

Hey dumb asses he's tensing, not flexing his muscles!!! You bunch of losers

**Writer F**

wonder why he got bottled? Hmmm

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<sup>9</sup> *FHM.com*, ‘MMS Gallery: Horror’, accessed 01.06.05.



**Writer G**

yeah lol lets show how strong we are after getting our ass kicked lol

**Writer H**

nothing to be proud of....loser

(*FHM.com*, 'MMS Gallery: Horror', accessed 01.06.05).

Despite the photograph and original accompanying message intending to connote strength, the reader is criticized for having been beaten up (and for reveling in his violent encounter). 'Fag' is also used as an insult to undermine the reader's status as a 'hard' heterosexual man, while at the same time being an example of the way in which homophobia exists as an aspect of lad culture. Unlike in *menshealth.co.uk* the readers of *FHM.com* do not allow critical voices that threaten heterosexual stability, and gay men are firm outsiders to the culture, with women being complicit in defining *FHM* as heterosexual. The language, style and grammar used in the responses are akin to text speech with words such as 'wat' and 'cus' (instead of what and because), and this conveys a colloquial, and what could be read as a less well-educated tone of voice. The humour is comparable to the schoolyard, with similes such as 'arms like pipe cleaners' inspiring laughter (indicated through the use of 'ha' as a verbally signified extra-verbal gesture). While readers are able to submit posts to the website in features such as 'MMS Gallery: Horror' there is a set word limit of 150 words. There is no space for friendships to form between male readers, and the lack of interactive chat space precludes extended dialogues between men. Furthermore, the nature of photographs on 'MMS Gallery: Horror' (most often used to incite humour and/or repulsion) are not



conducive to extended forms of homosocial dialogues that are based around notions of identity (as we have seen in *menshealth.co.uk*). Male bonding takes place as a site of familiarized conflict on *FHM.com*, and heterosexual masculinity is a space where men communicate through billingsgate speech genres and deprecation.

In *FHM.com*, homosocial bonding is constructed by and through the brand of *FHM* rather than through interaction with a community of online male readers. Despite being collectively articulated as ‘lads’, users of the website are highly atomized, and therefore the idea of a community that is based upon reader interaction becomes an illusion that is supported by the interactive relationship between reader and text. There is not the same affinity and connection between men on *FHM.com* in comparison with *menshealth.co.uk*, and this is primarily a result of the lack of space to articulate masculinity as an intersubjective, online community. The cultural framework of *FHM* also demonstrates a refusal to directly confront masculinity in terms of emotional space, affective dialogues and relationships between men. Instead, grotesque bodies and performance are appropriated to construct notions of excess in a website that is actually highly regulated. Despite its self-fashioning as excessive and extreme, *FHM.com* is an implicitly rule-governed space, and in their ‘FAQ’ (Frequently Asked Questions) the producers state,



### Why don't you have a messageboard?

There is a place to discuss the 100 Sexiest women poll **right here**, but we're still mulling over the wisdom of allowing all you readers the chance to shut us down with your libelous links and comments. Once the lawyers stop sweating, we'll launch a messageboard

(*FHM.com*, 'FAQ', Accessed 07.12.04. The use of bold text indicates a weblink).

In the above dialogue, the journalists use double-voiced discourse to distance themselves from the implementation of rules, using images of 'lawyers' and 'libelous links' as forms of official speech that are external to the projected excesses of *FHM* culture.

In *FHM* and *FHM.com*, journalists are positioned as the reader's mate, and the informality of the relationship between magazine and reader constructs rather synthetic notions of interactive community. As Bethan Benwell has stated with regard to printed versions of lads' magazines such as *FHM*,

The magazines do, however, promote both a sense of interactiveness (written prose is constructed to loosely suggest spoken *interaction* and the presence of the reader is strongly foregrounded), and also explicitly encourage *real* interaction in the form of letters and joke pages, as well as promotions involving real readers, even if this "interaction" is clearly a mediated and synthetic one (Benwell:2001:20).

Journalists define the terms of community as it appears in *FHM.com*, and while readers can be seen to visit the website in large numbers, and do participate online, reader participation exists as minimal forms of commentary that do not generate bonds between readers as a collective community. In *FHM.com*, participants are unable to discuss masculinity and embodied experiences as men through dialogic interaction with other men. Nevertheless a homosocial space is constructed by *FHM*, and the



community is constructed around shared desires (primarily relating to women) and masculinities that are positioned as a site of difference from visual representations of the 'Other'.

## **Interactivity and Women's Bodies in *FHM.com***

*FHM.com* frames photographs of women's bodies as objects of sexual desire and consumption. Women's bodies are central to the construction of online masculinity in *FHM.com*, and the framing of women's bodies in games functions to enhance both the objectification of women and the control that readers have over images of women. While the games in *FHM.com* do not exclusively use images of women, the games in which women appear objectify and exert control over the body in stereotypical ways that fragment and fetishize women's sexuality. Many games in *FHM* feature women as (hyper)sexual objects, constructing notions of the 'lad' as playful in ways that again relate to schoolboy humour. 'Games' is a section of *FHM.com* on which weblinks are posted to games such as 'Butt Bongo Babes', 'Strip Poker' or 'Tetris with Tits', that all focus upon fragmented and fetishized breasts and buttocks of women models (even in their titles). Using the example of 'Butt Bongo Babes' one reader posted a weblink to this game and stated:

**And here's a cracking little game**

I'm sure you'll like!

Remember the game where you collected the falling beer bottles in the crate to make the women undress? Well, here's the latest version!

Enjoy!

(*FHM.com*, 'Games Message Board', accessed 09.01.05).



The web-link provided by the reader takes us to a site where women's bodies are used in a game of memory that starts with sequential slapping of women's buttocks, and progresses onto more difficult sequences that demand increased concentration.

Figure 8.2<sup>10</sup>



In 'Butt Bongo Babes', a virtual hand is given to readers so that they can slap women's buttocks in sequence and 'drum those bums' in order to win prizes. The women's buttocks shake when slapped, and if the player successfully memorizes a number of sequences they are offered a prize 'money-shot' that consists of strip teases performed for the player by young slim women. If the player is able to complete at least 25 slap sequences in order then a special 'money-shot' is awarded where *four* women provide a striptease and blow kisses. The fact that the special, interactive 'money-shot' features numerous women is important in the context of *FHM.com*, where the ultimate

<sup>10</sup> *FHM.com*, 'Games: *FHM.com*'s 100 Greatest Games: Butts Bongo Babes', accessed 21.12.04. This is an *FHM.com* weblink to an external website <<http://www.bongobabes.co.uk/>>.



heterosexual male fantasy is constructed as being the observer (and implied participant) of 'girl on girl' action.<sup>11</sup> New visual software is used to position heterosexual male readers as the recipient of a (virtual) ultimate fantasy. The constructed fantasy is 'girl-girl' action rather than lesbian, as there is a voyeuristic male presence, and women are seen to perform for the (implicit) male viewer's attention. While lesbian women could be deemed a threat to heterosexual masculinity, the fantasy sequences created by *FHM* and the games on *FHM.com* depoliticise lesbian lifestyles, and portray women who are not only ultra feminine, but also whose insatiable sexual appetites come under control through the camera lens. Any potential threat is controlled through the aggressively heterosexual environment of *FHM*, and male spectators are positioned as controllers of the gaze.

The way that technology is designed to objectify women's bodies in the games displayed on *FHM.com* reflects the voyeuristic consumption and disembodied positioning of heterosexual masculinity. It can also be said to define a space for male control and ownership over, and competition regarding, women. On the subject of computer games, Donna Haraway has stated,

The culture of video games is heavily orientated towards individual competition and extraterrestrial warfare. High-tech, gendered imaginations are produced here [...] The technologies of visualization recall the important cultural practice of hunting with the camera and the deeply predatory nature of photographic consciousness (Haraway:1991:168-9).

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<sup>11</sup> Myra MacDonald has used the phrase 'girl-girl' action in her analysis of how lesbian images are constructed by men to fit into normative paradigms of femininity (Macdonald:1995:187).



While Haraway's work involves the discussion of war games, the analysis is deeply relevant to how women are positioned in games and in front of the camera lens, objectified by a male gaze that is enhanced through active participation with the image displayed. Women are positioned as sexualised and/or fetishized, and add to the construction of homosocial male space, where users can indulge in common fantasy. Games attest to the cultural positioning of masculinity, and in *FHM.com*, women's bodies become sites for heterosexual male bonding in ways that cast men as infantile and also as symbolically degraded, since the website structurally positions men as collective, yet highly atomised, users who gather around a communal site of masturbatory fantasy that is reminiscent of 'jerk circles'.

In Chapter 7 I outlined how grotesque 'freaks' were displayed as objects of scrutiny, and above I have detailed some of the ways that women are marked as 'Other' in the visual framework of *FHM.com*. Heterosexual masculinity is constructed through sources of entertainment, and in the rare instances where the male body is shown online (as with the grotesque lad and images of wounds), homosocial bonding acts as a site of conflict. Structurally, the absence of heteroglossia in *FHM.com* restricts the potential for male-male bonding, and prevents the transgression of the produced cultural environment with dialogues of conflict and dissent (as was apparent in *menshealth.co.uk*). In outlining notions of heteroglossia and monoglossia Bakhtin stated that with monoglossia 'there is only one subject here – cognizing (contemplating) and speaking (expounding). In opposition to the subject is a *voiceless thing* (Emerson



and Holquist:1986:161). The relationship between *FHM.com* users and visual technology is constructed as monoglossia, although the analogy does stretch a little when we take into consideration the small level interactive commentaries that can now be exchanged between participants and the website. Nevertheless, rather than representing an ideal space for dialogism (heteroglossia), *FHM.com* displays collective monologues that are centred upon fixed objects, providing a one way dialogue with the text rather than between a community of readers.

## **Women, Soft-Core Pornography, and Fantasy in *FHM.com***

Photo shoots of models and ‘honeys’ on *FHM.com* have become increasingly explicit, using pornographic repertoires to display women’s bodies as pay-per-view ‘uncut’ objects of consumption through both static and moving images. The popularity of pornography on the internet has been widely reported, and the online environment offers extensive, immediate and private access to a wide range of pornography. The positioning of male readers in looking at naked women’s bodies, and in reading women’s fantasy narratives, places male readers of *FHM.com* as voyeurs in communities organised around scrutiny and desire. The theme becomes repetitive, yet the lad refuses to observe the self and instead displaces sexual desire onto bodies of women. In *FHM.com*, women often act out male fantasies and indulge men in scopophillic voyeurism, nowhere more so than through MMS photographs and fantasy narratives.



In 'MMS Gallery: Girls', readers post mobile-phone photographs of women in sexually explicit poses that are submitted to the website for public comment. Those who submit such photographs often claim to be the women themselves, and the ways that some of the same women repeatedly submit photographs of themselves in sexually explicit poses allows us to believe that these women hold investments in the *FHM.com* community. One investment women hold in a site such as *FHM.com* is the fantasy of appearing as a sexual object, of being perceived as sexually attractive in a highly competitive environment. There is also the faint possibility that these women might be 'discovered' by the magazine and given modelling contracts (as happens with the 'highstreet honeys' competition in *FHM*). Yet women are not always viewed as attractive, and harsh, personal comments can be made about the bodies of women readers who have submitted sexually explicit photographs. The photographs submitted to the 'MMS Gallery' are akin to the readers' wives photographs published in pornographic magazines, being low budget, unedited photographs of women who portray themselves (or are portrayed) as sexually available. However, the difference in the context of the internet is the ability for readers to comment and join in on the collectively constructed fantasy by communicating desire. Male readers often submit photographs of their girlfriends, wives or 'bits on the side' to be judged by other readers. Heterosexual masculinity is performed through women's bodies, and readers make comments such as 'Do you like my girl?', 'What do you think of my fiancée's bottom' or 'These beauties were waiting for me when I got home! Result!' (*FHM.com*, 'MMS Gallery: Girls, accessed 03.07.05). Men perform sex fantasies through women's bodies and bond with other readers over projected sites of desire. It is notable how



comments are normally made about the photograph submitted, with audiences positioning themselves as consumers of the 'action'. The way that male readers boast about their sexual partners also attests to definitions of heterosexual masculinity, and the power and status attached to consuming beautiful women.

To demonstrate the sexually explicit nature of the interaction between men and women, and the styles of speech used in the posts, I outline one typical example from this feature.<sup>12</sup> Under the caption 'Ready 4 spankin now and anyfing else u'd lik 2 do 2 me!!!!', there is a woman positioned on a bed wearing just her underwear and boots with her buttocks raised for the camera. The woman's face is obscured, yet the content of the photograph connotes sexual availability. The following comments were made readers on the website,

**Writer A**

Hold tight baby i am comin in, great hips to hold on 2 y i am rockin u back and forth  
!!!!

**Writer B**

Take it in the stink??????

**Writer C**

Hi ya...well 2 b fair I can't put down what I want to say...drop me a mial at  
\*\*\*\*\*@ hot mail . co . uk

**Writer D**

Hi babble ;-) just wanna say u r a top quality woman - keep the pics coming an the  
juices flowing ;-)

**Writer E**

I could think of a few things I could do to that!! Email me at  
\*\*\*\*\*@hotmail.co.uk to chat about them!! [X] ;OP

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<sup>12</sup> For further examples visit *FHM.com*, 'MMS Gallery: Girls'.



**Writer F**

i`d like to do a lot of things show us more you minx !!!

(*FHM.com*, 'MMS Gallery: Girls', accessed 01.06.05)

The style of speech used by respondents continues in the pornographic tradition, and we can see how the first reader fantasises about his own position in the action of sexual intercourse. The readers do not talk to one another, yet their fantasy plays off one another, and once again we can see how the lad is positioned as part of a 'jerk circle' with the woman's body being used as a masturbatory tool. Homosocial bonding is directly through the woman's body, and the collective articulation of desire becomes associated with action, virility and power. However, simultaneously, in providing email addresses, Writer C and Writer E go beyond a communal articulation of desire to a request for more personal communication with the woman. In this instance *FHM.com* can be said to function less as a site for homosocial bonding and more as a contact page for male/female (cyber) sexual relations.

In his work on masculinity and pornography, David Buchbinder claimed that pornography offered space for homosocial bonding, providing an imaginary community for men based upon similar sexual tastes (Buchbinder:1998:110). As Buchbinder neatly summarised, 'woman becomes a site on which men may meet and confront one another, and thereby bond with one another' (Buchbinder:1998:112). This is evident in my study of *FHM.com*, where the refusal to deconstruct the self is displaced onto women as the focal point for desire and communication. The display and judgement of women combine in lad culture to form notions of heterosexual



masculinity that are based upon sex, desire, and implied virility. Women also represent a point of difference to masculinity in *FHM.com*, a position of the 'Other' in male communities that is not offered a critical voice. As I discuss below, women do communicate in the wider culture, but dialogues are complicit with lad culture and the sexual objectification of women. The display of women's bodies reveals how masculinity is defined in a cultural space where the lad evades fixed identity.<sup>13</sup> As Richard Dyer states, 'but the most insistent and relentless representation of male sexuality is not how men are represented at all, but rather in the way that women are looked at by the camera eye' (Dyer:1993:117).

In *FHM.com*, women's voices are used to construct fantasy narratives in the features 'Ladies Confessions' and 'Girls on the Sofa'. In 'Ladies Confessions' short stories are submitted to the website so that readers can rate them as 'saints' or 'sinners'. In their promotion of this feature, *FHM.com* state,

### **Ladies Confessions**

If you ladies are going to, say, use root vegetables, get wet and willing in the bathroom or just bonk the milkman, then why not make it all worthwhile by owning up to your smutty antics on the pages of FHM.com! Your naughty missives will be read, moderated, and slapped up here in total anonymity for all the world's menfolk to see, and vote on. Are you a saint or a sinner? Let them decide... Click here to confess.

(*FHM.com*, 'Ladies Confessions', accessed 01.06.05).

The narratives from women in *FHM.com* are used to construct the boundaries of heterosexual male desire in an environment where men are resistant to confront their

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<sup>13</sup> Bethan Benwell has also used the term 'evasive masculinity' in her discussion of how men evade fixed identity through the use of ironic discourses in lads' magazines (Benwell:2004).



own bodies and talk about sexuality in relation to the male body. In her essay 'A Very British Carnival: women sex and transgression in *Fiesta* magazine', Feona Attwood analysed the ways that dirty talking was used by women in the context of pornography, seeing narrative as 'a journey towards climax' (Attwood:2002:101). Attwood stated that,

The notion of narrative as a goal is dependent to some extent on the visual depiction of women's bodies as the landscape for the journey taken by the male subject, yet the use of female narrators and the presentation of women as active subjects in pursuit of their own pleasure work to undercut any clear association of masculinity, subjectivity and dominance (Atwood:2002:101).

A similar pattern emerges in *FHM*, where the female body is displayed as a landscape on which to project the desire of the male subject. Throughout the site of *FHM.com* the grotesque is foregrounded, and the grotesque lad is positioned as active. The restrictive word limit hinders extended dialogue, and the interactive element functions as a site of familiar conflict communicated through billingsgate speech genres and deprecation. In a restrictive, rule-governed site, readership is atomized, the cultural framework refuses to confront masculinity as an emotional space, and bonding is largely constructed through the brand of *FHM*. *FHM.com* is a synthetic interactive community, largely defined by journalists, but functions as a homosocial space around shared desires. Games are used on the site both to enhance the objectification of women and to further (male) readers' control over images of women, with women's bodies functioning as sites for heterosexual male bonding.



## Online Magazines, Community and Conditions for Heteroglossia

Bakhtin's work on dialogism, speech genres and the conditions for heteroglossia has aided my understanding of how communication functions dialogically in the construction of masculinity, and how the form in which speech is cast (speech genres) reflect the positioning of the author in relation to 'Others'. In this chapter, I have argued that gender identity work must be analysed dialogically online and in relation to notions of communality. Online men's magazines such as *menshealth.co.uk* construct communities that are clearly gendered, and in which men communicate the desire for forms of communion and male homosocial bonding. In his work on dialogism, Bakhtin highlighted how meaning was constructed interactively and inter-personally, and as Lucia Santaella-Braga neatly summarised 'meaning is hence language in movement, or dialogue' (Santaella-Braga:2004:130). According to Bakhtin, as humans we are constructed through dialogue, however dialogue is conceived as necessarily interdependent, and is an inherently social act that actively positions the self in relation to 'Others'. As Michael Holquist claims, in Bakhtin's work, 'the self, then, may be conceived as a multiple phenomenon of essentially three elements (it is – at least – a triad, not a duality): a center, a not-center, and the relation between them' (Holquist:1990:18).

The idea of the 'Other' has formed a crucial aspect of my analysis, and women and gay men have been analysed as specific sites of difference that are positioned as 'Other' in



defining the boundaries of heterosexual male communities in terms of difference and conflict. In Bakhtin's work the 'Other' is socially positioned, but relates contextually to speech and speech genres. However, in gendered communities that are organised around perceptions of heterosexual masculinity, women and gay men are foregrounded as a point of contrast, and become implicit in speech genres that serve to reinforce heterosexual masculine identification. The notion of the 'Other' as a site of difference has been discussed by many academics. While the 'Other' as a site of difference is not a new concept, the shift to online forms of readership articulates difference in new ways as groups are brought together to negotiate their claim to a voice in new communities. Gay readers of *menshealth.co.uk* express just that, and while there is evidence of tensions between heterosexuality, homosexuality and homosocial desire, gay readers have carved out spaces for representation in the wider community of *menshealth.co.uk*. While tensions are expressed around the ambiguity of the male body as desirable and the discussion of sexual attraction, heterosexual and gay readers alike hold investment in the wider discourses of health, fitness and fashion, and as one gay reader of *menshealth.co.uk* stated on a thread called 'Here's a surprise',

hello

Ive been reading mens health about 2 or 3 times a year for the last two or three years. One of the reasons for me not reading it more often is that i have felt that the magazine seems to completely ignore gay and bisexual men and act as if no such creature exists. I am quite surprised and pleased to have found this section of the magazine on the web. Who knows one day i might even read something of a similar standard in the print version of the magazine!

(*menshealth.co.uk*, 'Here's a surprise', accessed 17.08.02).

In the above post we can see how the shift to the internet has opened up space for gay readers on the *menshealth.co.uk* message boards. Heteroglossia in *menshealth.co.uk*



allows multiple voices to express opinions in terms of conflict as well as consent.

While gay men do not participate on equal terms (since both the website and magazine are constructed around a heterosexual norm), gay men can, and do, participate on *menshealth.co.uk* as legitimate voices under the concept of universality that covers the male body.

As I have discussed above in relation to *menshealth.co.uk*, racial and ethnic identities are more complex and difficult to identify, since they are not often verbalised as a necessary aspect of (dis)identification with the wider heterosexual male community. In *FHM.com* the lad is positioned as implicitly white, and while the subject of race is not discussed, the majority of visual images relate to white bodies. In *menshealth.co.uk*, gender and heterosexuality are foregrounded, and race is a particularly controversial subject. Explicit forms of racism are not tolerated online by either website. In contrast, sexism and homophobia are more readily articulated, particularly in *FHM.com* where heterosexual masculinity is defined as a position of contrast and conflict. In this thesis I have taken white men as the culturally defined norm of *menshealth.co.uk*, and the cultural environments of the two websites under study have been defined primarily through the use of white bodies.

In *Methodology for the Human Sciences*, Bakhtin outlined the notion of monoglossia as the inverse of heteroglossia, using the model of the 'exact' sciences to explain how



monologic forms of knowledge render subjects voiceless, and are dialogic only in cognition (Emerson and Holquist:1986:161). As I discussed above, *FHM.com* bears some resemblance to monologic forms of discourse, since heteroglossia is undermined through the lack of space for dialogic interactivity between readers, and also through the ways that 'Others' are objectified and rendered voiceless. While women are not strictly voiceless in the culture of *FHM*, and clearly have access to technology, women's online narratives conform to cultural standards of heterosexual fantasy and are positioned as complicit with the patriarchal cultural framework. In the construction of an 'interactive' community, *FHM.com* appropriates marketplace speech genres (a style that was seen to typify the transgression offered by the carnivalesque and its space for multiple voices), and use prurient forms of humour to undermine the transgressive potential of the carnivalesque, with the website restricting claims to excess through a rule governed space. Nevertheless, the personification of the magazine as a 'mate' (facilitated by journalists) and the introduction of e-mails to readers (such as the '*FHM.com* Friday E-mail') creates an illusion of community and heteroglossia.

There have been two distinctive types of homosocial community analysed in this chapter. *Menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com* differ considerably in terms of website structure, the conditions for heteroglossia, and the speech genres employed by readers/journalists in carving out male domains. *Menshealth.co.uk* incorporates heteroglossia into the structuring of the dialogic space, with social diversity, communion



and dissent being integral aspects of the online community.<sup>14</sup> Heteroglossia in *menshealth.co.uk* allows the articulation of a queered sensibility that exists in tension with traditional heterosexisms. There are tensions generated by the desirable male body in terms of the male gaze (as we saw in Chapter 6), and the boundaries between desire and identification when looking at the bodies of other men are often blurred in the search for the idealized body. Readers articulate such tensions in *menshealth.co.uk*, and while I have used the example of how heterosexual men recognise and distance themselves from gay connotations in this chapter, there is space for gay male dialogues on *menshealth.co.uk* (as I have discussed above). Gay men do have a voice, and are given space to voice their criticisms as we saw earlier in the thread ‘THE Six Pack Challenge...’. However, I have focused upon the tensions created by homosocial spaces, the representation of the near-naked male body and expressions of sexual desire in order to understand how heterosexual men position themselves in terms of gender and sexuality amongst the wider community.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined how *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com* construct spaces for the production of homosocial communities through idiomatic conventions that constitute male readers as ‘communities’. Through the discussion of affective dialogues and brotherhood in *menshealth.co.uk*, I found evidence of male investments

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<sup>14</sup> As we have seen above in the threads ‘Dealing with Unattractiveness’ and ‘Anything Else: Chatting’, where there were mixed responses to both original posts, and where meaning was intersubjectively negotiated.



in homosocial communities as spaces to communicate problems, as well as to bond over the subject of the male body and fitness. The online environment of message boards allowed for a simultaneous anonymity for men to express feelings that are largely hidden or private in wider society, and also to feel as though they were part of something much bigger than themselves in ways reminiscent of feminist CR. While the online community of *menshealth.co.uk* is not a political movement, there are definite needs that are expressed by men in homosocial spaces. Communion is often articulated in heavily gendered terms, with homosociality representing an ideal space for men (although women can also play a part in the community in very specific ways such as advice on relationships and sites on which to construct sexual fantasies).

The community of *FHM.com* is ambiguously constructed, and while there is evidence of a homosocial community, such notions are built around production, with little space to intersubjectively negotiate notions of gender and identity dialogically with other readers. In Chapter 7 I outlined how *FHM* was a grotesque text, using grotesque bodies to construct aspects of lad culture. The excessive behaviours of lad culture involves performances of the grotesque, with grotesque 'Others' being positioned as objectified and scrutinized in ways that enhance the male gaze. The visual representation of 'Others' places the lad in a position of control and mastery, with technology being designed to heighten (hetero)sexual pleasure from a male perspective. The lad is indulged in (hyper)sexual images of women's bodies and fantasy narratives that temporarily suspend his subordinated masculinity and 'reality'. Technology



renders the lad powerful in the context of the website, with grotesque performances heightening bravado, both through visual display and also through the insults and curses that are posted by readers.

As we have seen in previous chapters, the excess and transgression that characterises Bakhtin's carnivalesque are not apparent in *FHM.com*. As I have already suggested, the regulation of the structural framework and the objectification of grotesque bodies appropriates notions of excess in ways that limit the potential for resistance towards conceptions of hegemonic masculinity. The bonding of homosocial communities in *FHM.com* occurs through the bodies of 'Others' as maps to trace desire, repulsion and difference. This is no different to the printed version of *FHM*, however there has been a shift in reading relations with respect to increased forms of visual interactivity with the body on internet websites. Through participation in games, readers of *FHM.com* shape their (inter)active reading experience with focus and concentration upon fragmented women's body parts. While games are produced environments and limited by their design, they extend magazine cultures as perceived interactive spaces. They also extend *FHM.com* as a heterosexual male space, defining masculinity through competition and consumption of 'Others'. The interactivity of *FHM.com* is very distinctive from *menshealth.co.uk*, and when I talk about interactivity in the former site, it is with recognition that *FHM.com* is also a highly regulated space with notions of community that are shaped by producers. Nevertheless, there are features such as 'MMS Gallery' where readers post in their own unedited photographs and



frame representation on their own terms through small-scale commentary on what they see before them. By allowing relatively small message board spaces, *FHM.com* recuperates the freedom of expression while at the same time promoting the magazine as a communal experience.

In her research on women's magazines and everyday reading experiences, Joke Hermes commented that 'as a genre, women's magazines are multi-piece invitations to invest in temporary and imaginary identities' (Hermes:1995:64). Men's magazines such as *FHM* similarly engage with imaginary identities with respect to sexual fantasy, and earlier we saw how readers of *FHM.com* engaged with sexual fantasy through comments made in the feature 'MMS Gallery: Women'. As I outlined in Chapter 4, the internet and computer networks lend themselves to the extension of imaginary identities through the construction of personae. There is no guarantee of authenticity online, yet the shift towards online collective forms of readership holds the potential to enhance temporary imaginary identities, performing them as disembodied acts amongst other readers rather than maintaining them in the realm of fantasy and singular thought. Online men's magazines can open up the interactive reading experience through the construction of large-scale interactive communities that perform as gendered spaces. *Menshealth.co.uk* present a good example of how men's lifestyle magazines are expressed interactively as homosocial communities. Although *FHM.com* does not engage with the same level of reader interactivity, the website constructs a strong homosocial community, and allows readers to engage with restricted



forms of dialogue that shapes the online reading experience as distinctive from the printed magazine format.



# Conclusion

The men's lifestyle magazines *FHM* and *Men's Health* (and their respective websites) present distinctive and differing constructions of masculinity. In this thesis I have drawn a three-way analysis on representations of idealized male bodies, grotesque male bodies and the construction of homosocial communities to understand how notions of heterosexual masculinity are positioned within men's lifestyle magazines. The originality of my thesis lies in its specific focus upon the dichotomies presented by idealized and grotesque male bodies, and through using new tools of analysis to provide original insights such as the focus placed upon the production of whiteness, abjection, and muscular male bodies. Furthermore, the shift to online magazines has opened a new site of analysis for magazine readership, web-based products and the shift in men's magazine culture onto the internet as an arena of homosocial bonding. This thesis extends debates on male bodies, desire and representation, and presents an original contribution to knowledge on the subjects of the male grotesque and the shifts into online forms of magazine readership.

This project offers an original analysis of the relationship between men's lifestyle magazines and contemporary, white, British masculinities in a number of specific respects. For example, by complicating theories of the gaze through the analysis of representations of the Adonian male body as the focal point of the gaze in men's



magazines, in revealing how male participants of *menshealth.co.uk* possess increased recognition of the ambiguous positioning of the male body (developing Bordo's theories on marketing the male body to heterosexual men), and then in articulating and negotiating a range of responses to these tensions. This project also notes that magazines such as *Men's Health* present a vision of masculinity that is bound within concepts of whiteness and hegemony, yet which uses visual imagery that has traditionally been viewed as the domain of black men, and in doing so challenges traditional mind/body binaries and reclaims the white physical body as an embodiment of power. This thesis also possesses originality in the claim that there is evidence of a specifically male grotesque in the culture of men's magazines, and through my analysis of the potential for celebrity women cover models in *FHM* to be read as (hyper)sexually grotesque. In this conclusion I will continue to summarise my arguments regarding idealized male bodies, grotesque male bodies, and online masculinities, before suggesting further areas for debate and research raised by this thesis.

## **Idealized Male Bodies**

In my work on the idealized male body I analysed how consumerism and discipline were the primary discourses that framed the male body as desirable. Advertisements have increasingly depicted the male body as sexualised, and although there are mechanisms inherent in advertisements that prevent the sexual objectification of the male body (such as postures, positioning, muscularity and implied action/activity), there



are an increasing number of images that portray naked male bodies, and which are targeted towards heterosexual male consumers. The male body in the Davidoff 'Cool Water' fragrance advertisement analysed in Chapter 6 is feminized, positioned as an object of beauty and connotes 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. The ambiguity within images such as the Davidoff or the Yves Saint Laurent advertisements (Figures 6.3 and 6.4 in Chapter 6), and the narcissism present in some *Men's Health* cover shots, complicates the dualisms outlined in Mulvey's theory of the gaze in which male bodies were denied the status of sexual object (Mulvey:1999). While consumer culture has been influential in targeting men as images of desire and in challenging the boundaries of the eroticized white male body, advertisements in men's lifestyle magazines utilise techniques such as muscular bodies and classical references to privilege a consuming, although increasingly ambiguous, heterosexuality.

While the project of sculpting and styling the male body has led to a cultural and representational shift where it is now acceptable for men to be centred as objects of the gaze, there is still some resistance to the objectification of the male body by readers. The lad in *FHM* is constructed as a style conscious consumer, yet his relationship to the grotesque and his refusal to confront the male body outside of fashion, advertising and the abject (of wounds and injuries) position him as resistant to the male gaze. In the defensively heterosexual *FHM*, women's bodies construct the boundaries of desire as the focus of the male gaze. However, in a culture that otherwise holds a fear of the gay 'Other', the strong heterosexual overtones of *FHM* (visually constructed through



(hyper)sexual women's bodies) also functions to create space for more ambiguous representations of the male body in advertising and fashion features. In Chapter 8 I noted the tensions that arose in the context of *menshealth.co.uk* between heterosexual male identification with the muscular male body, and the homoerotic sexual desire for the same body expressed by a gay persona. Therefore, while writers such as Susan Bordo claim that advertisers have incorporated a dual marketing approach that renders heterosexual readers largely unaware of the homoerotic implications of advertisements, my own research into the online community of *menshealth.co.uk* demonstrated that readers were often highly aware of the ambiguity surrounding the display of the partially naked muscular male body.

In the context of *Men's Health*, discipline was a central defining feature of the cultural framework that regulated both the inner and the outer body. With respect to the disciplined gaze, *Men's Health* encourages the fragmentation and measurement of the male body in their efforts to motivate men to sculpt muscularly toned bodies. The internalisation of self-surveillance techniques places the male body under intense scrutiny, and through research on the message boards of *menshealth.co.uk*, this project develops Peter Jackson, Nick Stevenson and Kate Brooks' argument that magazines such as *Men's Health* are sites of security for men by revealing that they can also produce feelings of anxiety and inadequacy among the many men who fail to embody the Herculean or athletic muscular ideal (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks:2001:96).



Black men, like women, have been consistently 'bodied', and as a consequence the project of perfecting a strong physique is always racially coded. In competitive (male) sports from boxing to athletics, black men have excelled, possibly dominated, in a manner that is highly visible in top events such as the Olympic Games. Yet my analysis of *Men's Health* revealed significantly little visibility of black bodies. Instead, classical figures such as Hercules and Adonis were represented through white bodies. Furthermore, white men were subjected to scrutiny in ways that women and black men have traditionally been objectified and scrutinised. The use of white muscular bodies in *Men's Health* defines white men through their physical stature, with hegemonic masculinity constructed around the body (although there is no strict mind/body dualism, since the reader of *Men's Health* is also positioned as an informed and educated reader). Narcissistic representations of white male bodies present a challenge to taken-for-granted assumptions that the gaze does not objectify them, and the project of building the white body is one that must be re-theorised for the ways in which men's magazines such as *Men's Health* reconfigure the male gaze and representations of the muscular male body.

## Grotesque Male Bodies

The grotesque male body is an essential aspect of the production of masculinities in the culture of *FHM* and *Men's Health*, and this thesis has engaged with the grotesque in order to extend readings of masculinity that have previously overlooked this area of



representation. While the grotesque has traditionally been viewed as feminine and symbolically linked to the maternal body (for example, through images of emasculated penises), there is evidence of a specifically (hyper)masculine grotesque in the culture of men's magazines (for example, through the bodybuilder). In the context of men's lifestyle magazines, visions of hypermasculinity (such as physical power, hardness, beer drinking culture or sexual virility) are present as a clear site of reference in representations of the grotesque, and the overall complexity and range of grotesque male bodies complicates and challenges Barbara Creed's argument that male bodies take on feminine characteristics when they become grotesque (Creed:1993:19). Similarly, and as I discussed in Chapter 3, in *The Female Grotesque* Mary Russo stated that male grotesques were '...produced through an association with the feminine, as the body marked by difference' (Russo:1994:13). While many representations of the male grotesque body that I analysed in *FHM* signified difference through femininity, there were also instances where the grotesque male body was associated with conceptions of an exaggerated, or hyper, masculinity. In Chapter 7 I used the examples of wounds, beer bellies and bodybuilding, as well as codes of behaviour associated with lad culture (sick pranks and billingsgate speech forms) to outline the possibilities of the male grotesque. While men's bodies can be read as vulnerable (in the display of wounds) or pregnant (as with images of beer bellies), there are wider discourses at work that are associated with notions of hypermasculinity, and which frame the male subject as fascinated with gore or position him as visually excessive in relation to (stereotypically) male cultural practices.



The grotesque is a particularly a prominent feature of *FHM*, however in my research there was a split between the regenerative opportunities offered by the grotesque and the ways that it was utilised as a space to objectify the bodies of ‘Others’.

Representation of the grotesque frequently depicted the bodies of ‘Others’ (primarily images of disability or fat bodies) as ‘freaks’, positioning them as spectacle in ways that reinforced a hierarchy where the lad stood as the omnipotent spectator. Nevertheless, as I discussed in Chapter 7, there were instances where the lad was implicated in the grotesque through reader photographs of injuries and wounds, as well as through degrading pranks conducted by journalists (who identified with the positioning of readers). There is space to read the male body as grotesque through cultural practices that are strongly related to exaggerated and stereotypically masculine behaviours (heroism, bravery) and practices (such as beer drinking and pub culture). Although the Bakhtinian potential of the grotesque is lost in *FHM*, the use of grotesque images, practices and speech demonstrates a contextual rebellion against closed, disciplined bodies. The grotesque is utilised as a form of masculine identification in *FHM*, with the lad appropriating modes of behaviour and speech that position him as reckless and rebellious. The potential for the male grotesque is an under researched area, and the evidence of the grotesque at work in lads’ magazines such as *FHM* is an attempt to initiate debate regarding the implications of such repertoires.

In contrast to *FHM*, the grotesque is a latent force in *Men’s Health*, and the pleasures and transgression of the grotesque are repressed through medical, bio-scientific and



consumer discourses that regulate and discipline idealized male bodies. Through rendering the grotesque as an invisible force, its influence became apparent by the culture of fear and prevention that exists in the relationship between men, health and the inner body. The potential of the grotesque is also realised through bodybuilding, and the image of the professional bodybuilder as visually grotesque through regulation, discipline, control and the over-working of the body to bulge beyond the surface of the skin in the protrusion of muscle, sinew and veins. Many traditional distinctions and dualisms become blurred in the discussion of the bodybuilder as grotesque through over conformity and hypermasculinity (such as the classical and the grotesque, discipline and subversion, or feculence and sanitisation). I have used bodybuilding in this thesis as an example of ways in which the monstrous and the grotesque might be re-theorised to account for hypermasculinity.

## Online Masculinities

The repositioning of men's lifestyle magazines onto the internet has not yet been fully examined, and I moved towards the study of online communities in men's lifestyle magazines both in order to trace the shift in focus from printed magazines to the internet, and to analyse the possibilities for men's magazine websites to allow reader participation. In the observation of *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com*, I studied the idiomatic conventions that positioned male readers as communities and noted that the distinctive differences in the structuring of *menshealth.co.uk* and *FHM.com* reflects the subsequent space for homosocial bonding and the expression of homosocial desires.



While online relations of reading allows readers to be complicit in the construction of homosocial spaces, the potential for homosocial communities is reliant upon the conditions for heteroglossia in men's magazine websites. Users of *FHM.com* are highly atomized, and the idea of a community based on extended reader interaction is an illusion supported by the interactive relationship between reader and text.

Despite the earlier analyses of *Men's Health* as a controlled and regulated magazine environment that foregrounded idealized images of the muscular male body and repressed the grotesque, the website *menshealth.co.uk* offers readers the space to present anxieties and desires about the body, alongside everyday experiences, to a community of readers. Gender was often articulated in communal terms, and readers expressed desire for homosocial spaces that were comparable to the early second wave feminist production of consciousness raising groups. In the expression of affective dialogues, readers of *menshealth.co.uk* demonstrated the emotional vulnerability of hegemonic masculinity. Through seeking advice on message boards, male users demonstrated the importance of the anonymous spaces of *menshealth.co.uk* in facilitating modes of talking that generally are not part of the idiom of homosociality. Through calls for 'brotherhood', male personae highlighted the investments that participants had in the homosocial community of *menshealth.co.uk*, and demonstrated that online space is conducive to forms of dialogue that cannot be easily approached outside of a cyber community. Yet while male homosociality is of clear importance to participants on *menshealth.co.uk*, there is evidence of women who participate on



message boards and who contribute to the website in consolidating the boundaries of heterosexuality. The roles of 'Others' (women and gay men) are significant as implicit sources of difference from which (hegemonic) masculinities are defined, and they mark the boundaries of desire in online message boards that lack visual content. Despite their status as 'Other', female and gay personae are not denied a voice, and the heteroglossia of *menshealth.co.uk* encourages interaction that is presented in terms of both conflict and agreement. Race was not easily identifiable online since it was less frequently marked in speech by readers. However there was evidence of black and Asian men participating in the *menshealth.co.uk* community, and despite the dominance of white bodies inside the printed magazine, online participants often referred to notions of the 'universal' male subject in the refusal to acknowledge race as a dividing factor between men.

In contrast with the affective dialogues present in *menshealth.co.uk*, male bonding takes place as a site of familiarized conflict on *FHM.com*. Men communicate through billingsgate speech genres and deprecation, and in a rule-governed site the cultural framework refuses to confront masculinity as an emotional space. The grotesque is foregrounded as a central element of the visual framework of *FHM.com*, and the bodies of 'Others' are displayed visually as sites of scrutiny and difference. The oppressive relationship between readers (lads) and grotesque bodies ('freaks') is reinforced by features such as 'Dr. Freak's Casebook'. The lad in *FHM* and grotesque 'Others' stand as clear opposites in ways that reinforce power relationships. In



grotesque representation, lads are photographed and published (either inside the magazine or online), by choice and are given space for critical voices that reinforce their status as masculine subjects. Women's bodies are also implicated in the construction of online heterosexual masculinities in *FHM.com*, and through the use of interactive games and pornography, women's bodies are enhanced as sexual objects while male participants control and receive virtual fantasies. Women represent a site for men to project collective desire and sexual fantasy, and the complicit photographs and fantasy narratives from women add to the cultural framework of *FHM*. The choice made by readers to submit photographs to features such as *FHM*'s 'Problems: Emergency Ward' or 'MMS Gallery' would be an interesting area of investigation, and I will now turn to a discussion of the potential areas for future research that have emerged from the work conducted in this project.

## Further Areas for Debate

This thesis has presented original material for the study of idealized muscular male bodies, grotesque male bodies and online gendered communities. I have drawn upon a number of interdisciplinary fields in the study of *FHM* and *Men's Health* as sites for the (re)production and negotiation of white heterosexual masculinity, and this research is intended to produce a contributions to knowledge in feminism, men's studies, media studies, cultural studies and sociology. In analysing the idealized male bodies produced in *Men's Health* and the construction of a variety of 'gazes', I have observed the ambiguities that are produced in relation to homoerotic desire and the heterosexual



male subject. Beauty and the muscular male body have traditionally been associated with images of women and black men, and I have examined how white men have started to reclaim beauty and physical strength in ways that simultaneously support their status as hegemonic subjects. The study of men, heterosexual masculinities and the gaze in visual culture is not new. However with supporting website material I have examined how hegemonic masculinities accommodate both idealized representations of the muscular male body as powerful, and also hidden and underlying tensions in the failure to embody such ideals. Rather than facing a crisis in masculinity, complex tensions are a part of hegemonic identities, particularly as men increasingly embrace and negotiate terms of masculinity as they are constructed through conceptions of beauty and muscular bulk. Men have traditionally lacked spaces for the discussion of affective dialogues amongst other men, and online readership opens new avenues for social research into men and emotional discourses. The shift to online forms of readership is a new area of analysis in magazine research, and I have not seen any wider academic studies on the online environment of men's online magazines. Men's online magazines are a source of untapped potential for the study of masculinities, and for the study of women in male dominated (and male defined) web-spaces.

On *menshealth.co.uk*, men are positioned as both powerful and vulnerable in online dialogues, and in future research it would be interesting to analyse whether the questions raised by readers of *menshealth.co.uk* are specific to, or transcend, the magazine environment. While online participants reveal tensions, anxieties and



vulnerabilities in the online environment of *menshealth.co.uk*, this is juxtaposed with the lack of emotion expressed by readers of *FHM.com*. I would like to question this split on a more equal footing, in spaces where readers of *FHM.com* are given space to communicate issues and opinions. Observing the message boards of *menshealth.co.uk* has opened up new questions for male identities, particularly on the subject of male support (or 'brotherhood'), and it would be interesting to know whether such needs are contextual to *Men's Health*, or whether they signal issues for wider white, heterosexual male identities. It is necessary to understand how white men are positioned as both powerful and subjected, and also to listen to men who articulate the need for emotional male spaces.

A further area for future debate for both printed magazine and online research would be to study the investments that women have in men's magazine cultures. During my research I found evidence of participation from women in both *FHM* and *Men's Health*. In *FHM*, women frequently posted in photographs and entered competitions such as the 'Highstreet Honeys' or 'Student of the Year', and online women were seen to submit sexually explicit photographs and fantasy narratives. In the culture of *Men's Health*, women's participation was restricted to the online environment where they engaged in general chat as well as in dialogues on sex and relationships. The investments that women have in the cultures of men's lifestyle magazines is an area of research that is undeveloped, and which holds the potential for understanding how and why women are complicit in their own sexual objectification.



In this thesis I have also examined the possibility for a reading of the male body as grotesque through notions of hypermasculinity. The idea of the male grotesque opens vast questions that relate to the positioning of men in social, cultural and media analysis. While I have been unable to expand upon wider popular cultural forms, in Chapter 3 and Chapter 7 I highlighted how notions of the male grotesque might also be read in wider media culture and the rise in cruel realism (with programmes such as *Jackass* or *Johnny Vegas 18 Stone of Idiot*), and it would be interesting to read how the grotesque male body performs in these wider contexts in future research. In this thesis I have presented new areas for research into masculinities and men's lifestyle magazines, and through my work I hope to trigger subsequent debates that embrace both the potential of the male grotesque and the production of male online magazine communities.

Word count – 82,901.



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